



What is Reformed worship?

It is covenantal

As a community of faith, the Church is in a relationship with her Triune God of grace. Scripture describes this relationship as a marriage (Ephesians 5). As such, it is both legal and intimate. What draws these different spheres of thought together is that our marriage relationship is a covenant. In this covenant, our purpose, as the bride of the Lord, is to give our loving God all our worship in thought, word, and deed.

A Biblical category for worship

To fully appreciate this covenantal aspect of our worship, let us first ask where we as Christians in the Reformed tradition place ourselves in the "worship spectrum." Are we "contemporary" or "traditional?" These are the two categories everyone is familiar with in our day. Unfortunately, these categories are neither biblical nor helpful.

We must reject the labels of "contemporary" and "traditional" as a false dichotomy and unhelpful in pursuing dialog with those outside of our circles of influence. These labels for styles of worship, by definition, are rooted in a particular time, culture, and preference. The "contemporary" worship movement has cornered itself into being hip, modern, up to date, relevant, and therefore more audience appealing. It is also, from a historical perspective, a modern-day novelty. The "traditional" worship movement suggests that it is not necessarily biblical, but based only upon what our past traditions did.

This Protestant belief in the sufficiency of Scriptures cannot, and does not, exclude the area of worship. In fact, when it comes to worship, more than any other area, we need to go back to the pages of the sacred text. We do this because we are not devising a way for us to draw people to God based on what our culture enjoys, but we are seeking to do what God Himself commands and is pleased by in our worship. Thus, we are to be contemporary as we communicate the Gospel to sinners in the vernacular of the day. We are to be contemporary as we seek to set the inspired words of the Psalms to tunes that we can sing and enjoy. All the while, we are not to forsake the catholic and Protestant tradition that has gone before us.

"Covenantal" worship

The story of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is about the unfolding of God's covenant with His people. Scripture reveals that God is a sovereign, covenant-making God. When He created man, He created him in a covenant relationship with Himself. After Adam broke that original covenant, God did not abandon what He had made, but came to the rescue in mercy and grace by making another covenant — what we call "the covenant of grace." This covenant of grace, which began in principle in Genesis 3:15, continued with Noah, reached a formal status with Abram in Genesis 15, and developed throughout the history of redemption until its climax in Jesus Christ.

The New Covenant Church of Jesus Christ, then, is the continuation of God's covenant of grace from the dawn of redemptive history. We see this in the fact that the titles that the LORD gave to Israel at the foot of Sinai, when He renewed His covenant with them, are also applied to us: *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession..."* (1 Peter 2:9 cf. Exodus 19:6).

Covenant theology not only defines God's dealings with His people throughout history and unites together all of the Bible as the unfolding account of God's one redemptive plan, but it also dictates our

response to God. Because covenants are between two parties, the structure of covenants also informs our worship. Covenant worship is a dialog between God and His people. This means that God speaks to us, and then we respond to Him. God says to us *"I will be your God"* and we respond, *"We will be your people."* God calls us to worship and we respond in song. God speaks to us His Law, we respond to Him with confession of our sins, He speaks to us the absolution of our sins, and we respond in prayer. He speaks to us in the Word and sacraments and we respond with gifts of gratitude and doxology. This is the heart of what it means that our worship is *covenantal* worship.

Form vs. substance

"Well that sounds great, but when it comes down to it, it doesn't matter *how* you worship, as long as you are sincere and it comes from the heart, right?" This popular way of thinking separates the substance of worship from the form of worship. It assumes a division between what we are to do in worship from how we do it.

We can no more divide substance from form in worship than we can divide our theology from its results in our practical lives. Thus, we express the praise we have for God in our hearts in words and acts (Psalms 29:1-2, 96:8, 99:9, 148:12, 13; Malachi 1:11).

How we worship God is a reflection of what we believe about God. Liturgy is theology in practice. As Christians have long said, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, that is, the law of prayer is the law of belief. In his controversy with the Pelagians, Prosper, a disciple of the great Augustine of Hippo, used a similar phrase in his response. In order to show the sovereignty of God's grace in salvation he appealed to the prayers of the liturgy. This is why "it is impossible to change the form (worship practice) without altering the content (theological conviction)." How we worship actually determines whom we worship.

Modern-day churches follow this principle with praise and worship bands, repetitive songs, mood lighting, etc. When you worship with such a church, you are participating in their theology as well. Have you ever wondered why most churches today begin their services with 20-30 minutes of singing? Most have not even asked this question. The protracted time of singing before the sermon (the "message," as it is called today) was begun in the nineteenth century American revivals. This long period of time in which singing took place, and which songs had a strong emphasis upon the individual's experience and feelings about God, was meant to "soften the hearts" of the congregation for the sermon and subsequent altar call or call for a decision to believe in Jesus (which were substitutes for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper). The great revivalist Billy Sunday speaks of this in his authorized biography, saying,

(A) half an hour to an hour of this varied music introduces each service. When the evangelist himself is ready to preach, the crowd has been worked up into a glow and fervor that make it receptive to his message.

The reason churches began using this format was because their theology matched it. Most churches were leaving historic Protestant doctrine for Pelagian and semi-Pelagian/Arminian belief about the nature of sin and grace. When you worship in this way you are joining in a theology that says that people are basically good, or at worst, just sick. People are able to reach out to God apart from grace or in cooperation with grace to grab hold of salvation.

As the Reformed historian W. Robert Godfrey relates, Whereas traditionally music was an important part of the dialog between God and His people, for many it has become the heart of worship, even called the "Praise and Worship" part of the service. Music seems to have become for some a new sacrament, mediating the presence and experience of God, establishing a mystical bond between God and the worshipper. With eyes closed and hands in the air worshippers repeat simple phrases that become Christian mantras.

This is evidenced in the words of Joe Horness, Willow Creek Community Church's music director, who says, *"At the heart of the contemporary worship movement is this longing to connect with God. To that end we use the music that best helps us speak our language."*

Apart from the life-giving Holy Spirit, we would never worship God. It is God who calls us to worship in His grace. Thus, Reformed worship reflects the biblical teaching of God being sovereign and condescending to us in grace, and our horrible blindness in sin.

Worship is a dialog between God and us, and not our offering of praise or our free-will efforts. Our service does not follow the structure of the nineteenth century revival. Instead, we follow the biblical pattern of call and response: God speaks in the call to worship, the greeting, the Law, the absolution, the reading and preaching of the Word, the Lord's Supper, and the benediction, while we respond in song, prayer, and offering. In biblical terms, worship is a ceremony in which God renews His covenant promises with us and we respond to Him in faith and praise. He has made a covenant of grace with us in Jesus Christ and He renews it with us every week in the Word and sacraments.

It seems that the spirit of the age, not the Spirit who inspired Scripture, guides churches in our day. Our democratic and therapeutic culture fosters our modern-day, American evangelical religion so that preference of worship style determines whether a church is pleasing to worshippers. If you do not believe me, just ask a friend to describe why he attends the church he goes to. Will he tell you about Christ-centered preaching that shows sin in the light of the Law and the only comfort of Christians in the Gospel? Will he mention godly church discipline, which ensures the purity of Christ's Church? Too often, what you hear is "my church's worship style and music is what I want."

Covenant renewal ceremony

This concept of covenant applies particularly to how the people of God worship. Worship is a covenant renewal ceremony. There are many examples in the Old Testament of ceremonies that renewed the original ratification of a covenant (Exodus 34, Deuteronomy 31:9-13, Joshua 24, 2 Kings 23, 2 Chronicles 15, Nehemiah 9-10, and Ezra 9-10).

In Joshua 24, for example, we read the account of the renewal of the covenant before Joshua died. This ceremony followed a very basic form, which we should be very familiar with because of our link to the Christian church:

1. there was a gathering of the people (v. 1), just as we gather;
2. God spoke, recounting His story (vv. 2-15), just as we hear His Word throughout the liturgy, especially in the sermon;
3. the people responded to God's Word (vv. 16-24), even as we respond in song, prayer, offering, and the creed;
4. the covenant was renewed with a visible sign (vv. 25-27), similar to how it is with us in the Lord's Supper;
5. finally, the people were dismissed (v. 28), even as we are dismissed from the presence of the Lord with the benediction.

This basic structure was commanded even earlier in the law (Leviticus 1:1-9), where the renewal of the covenant relationship between God and His people came through sacrifice (cf. 1 Kings 3:15; Psalm 50:5): 1) God *called* the worshiper to draw near with an offering from his herd (vv. 1-2); 2) the worshiper *confessed* his sin by placing his hands on the offering's head, symbolically transferring his guilt to the animal, then the sacrifice was slain and its blood is sprinkled as atonement for his sin (vv. 3-5); 3) the slain animal, symbolic of the worshiper, was then *consecrated* as it was offered to God according to His Word (vv. 6-7); 4) the smoke ascended into God's presence where it became "*food ... to the LORD,*" as a *communion* meal (vv. 8-9); 5) finally, God *commissioned* the worshiper for service in His kingdom (Numbers 6:22-27).

In the New Testament, this is gloriously fulfilled in Christ, who makes us His temple (Ephesians 2), His priests (1 Peter 2), as well as His sacrifices in our persons and praise (Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 13:15; 1 Peter 2). The concepts of covenant and sacrifice, therefore, lie at the core of biblical worship.

We learn from the covenant renewal pattern and covenant sacrifices how our worship is to be ordered and offered: we are *called* to worship, we *confess* our sin and are *cleansed* by the blood of Christ, we

are consecrated by the "sword of the Spirit," the preaching of the Word of God, we celebrate communion, and God speaks His commission to us.

Because worship is a ceremony of covenant renewal, its purpose is not to entertain, to get a thrill, to "get blessed," or to do whatever possible to draw a large crowd, as the philosophies of worship abound in churches today. Instead, the Scriptures clearly teach that worship is a meeting with God to renew our mutual bonds of fellowship.

In saying that biblical worship is covenantal worship, we recognize that in worship we participate in the mystery of communion with the Triune God. He is our God and we are His people, especially in worship. Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have participated in an eternal bond of love and fellowship, so too, when we draw near for worship we are caught up in that eternal fellowship with the unbegotten Father, through His eternally begotten Son, in the power and mystery of the eternally proceeding Spirit.

The motivation to worship is not because it brings us happiness, gives us a sense of self-fulfillment, builds family unity, or unites our nation or ethnic group in a common religious identity. It must be the Triune God Himself. God gives Himself to us in a covenant relationship. The Father loves us with an everlasting love by sending His Son to take our broken life to Himself and to give us new lives in the power of the Spirit. Since we gather to "call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised" (Psalm 18:3), our motivation in worship is God's worthiness because of who He is in Himself (Revelation 4:8), who He is as Creator (Psalm 19:1; Revelation 4:11), and who He is as Redeemer (Revelation 5:9-10, 12-13). Thus in our worship it is God alone who receives all the "power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (Revelation 4:12). The reasons for our praises are not our desires or feelings, but His mighty deeds of creation and redemption.

We are to worship God because God commands us to praise and glorify Him! This is what the first table of the Law commands us to do: we are to have no other gods but Jehovah, we are not to make images of Him, we are not to misuse His name, and we are to worship Him on His appointed day.

There is much for which to give praise. For example, in Paul's epistle to the Romans, he develops his defense of the Christian faith by proclaiming that all mankind stands condemned in Adam: "there is none righteous, no not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God ... there is no one good, no not one" (Romans 3:10a-11, 12c). "But God," he exclaims, "demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Through faith alone, God justified us, so that "there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). As if this were not enough to stimulate his heart and mind to praise, Paul goes on in chapters 8-11 to say that God actually loved us before the foundation of the world (8:29); He chose us according to His own mercy (9:16); He sends preachers to gather His fore-loved children (10:14-17); He has engrafted Gentiles, wild olive branches, into the tree of the covenant (11:17).

Because of these amazing benefits of our covenant Lord, Paul responded as a redeemed sinner and member of Christ's spouse, the church:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to Him. For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

(Romans 11:33-36)

This is the redeemed Church's doxology — this is your doxology! Sing his praises, Church, for "the LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad" (Psalm 126:3).

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