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Savoring God in Public Worship



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The passion for ruling is the mother of heresy.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (345-407 A.D.)

We are compelled to attempt what is unattainable, to climb where we cannot reach, to speak what we cannot utter. Instead of the bare adoration of faith, we are compelled to entrust the deep things of religion to the perils of human expression.

HILARY OF POTTIERS (367 A.D.)

It is right that those ancient doctrines of heavenly philosophy should, as time goes on, be cared for, smoothed, polished; but not that they should be changed, not that they should be maimed, not that they should be mutilated.

VINCENT OF LERINS (D. 450 A.D.), *A COMMENTARY*

In order to assist newcomers to our church, I prepared an overview of our Lord's Day Service. Depending on one's background there will be various aspects of our worship that seem strange to some evangelicals. We frequently recite the Apostles' Creed, formally confess our sins together and practice communion each week. Such decisions, as well as various others, raise questions. In order to help visitors to our church we have prepared a brochure that sets forth our vision of worship, priorities of worship, and order of worship.

OUR VISION OF WORSHIP

When we gather each Lord's Day in congregational worship we are responding to an ancient invitation from the Holy Scriptures: "Come, taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). At Christ Our King Church we believe that God is the soul's greatest good and that savoring him is our greatest pleasure (Psalm 16:11). These very basic beliefs drive what it is we are doing when we come together on Sunday mornings. As we worship together each Lord's Day, God comes near to us; we come near to him. We gather together out of a hunger and thirst for God. He comes near to feed and satisfy us.

When we come together each week to worship God, we are not escaping from the real world. We are *entering* the real world.

In worship we are “doing the world as it was meant to be done.” We are becoming truly human in the way that God intended us to be. Central to becoming truly human is recognizing our dependence upon God. Our most basic posture before God is one of need. We need forgiveness, we need direction, we need beauty, we need food and we need strength to carry on. Even more, we need him. The good news we hear each week is that God is wildly extravagant about giving to us. He loves to provide us with gifts—assurances of his grace, words of instruction, the food and drink of heaven, his blessing upon our work. More importantly, he loves to give us himself. In the weekly rhythm of worship, we are renewing our relationship with God. He gives of his love to us; we return our love to him.

OUR PRIORITIES IN WORSHIP

This vision of worship shapes our priorities in worship. In the Lord’s Day Service we seek to be God-centered, biblically faithful, thoughtfully catholic, congregationally involved and counter-cultural.

God-centeredness

This should go without saying, we know. After all, this is a church, right? What else would be our focus? However, in the murky world of today, such a claim needs to be in bold print front and center. There is a frequent temptation to push God to the margins of who we are and what we do. When God is not the center, the church becomes something other than people of God coming into the presence of God. The church becomes a three-ringed circus aimed at entertaining people with slick technology, with stand-up comics posing as preachers and with musical showbiz. The church becomes a lecture hall where a talking head aims at cramming brains with more information. When God is not at the center, the church becomes primarily a moral crusade, a political rally or a country club. Each of these substitute identities obscures the more awesome spectacle of an assembly of saints summoned into the presence of the living God (Psalm 111:1).

Biblical Formation

Because God tells us about himself through the words of Holy Scripture, we want our hearts and minds rooted deep within that soil. We want our imaginations soaked in the language of his revelation. The landscape of the Bible includes the varied topography of prophecies and stories, songs and laws, history and poetry—all of which give witness to who God is and what he is up to. At Christ Our King, we enter into that large world each week aiming to pay attention to God. At every turn, you will find our liturgy informed by the words of Holy Scripture. We pray the Psalms each Lord’s Day, give attention to the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13) and hear sermons which expound entire books of the Bible. We want our lives formed by something more than the latest word out of Wall Street or Hollywood. We want our lives shaped by the wisdom of God.

Thoughtful catholicity

Our liturgy reflects our belief that the church, which Jesus builds, is a “holy, catholic church.” It is holy in that it belongs to God. It is catholic in that it spreads across time and space. It is a universal church, bringing many different histories and many different nationalities into one new family. In an age of amnesia and “chronological snobbery,” we want our liturgy to have a memory. So you may hear us singing what was originally an ancient Hebrew Psalm, a sixth-century Gregorian chant, a sixteenth-century German anthem, an eighteenth-century English hymn, a nineteenth-century African spiritual or a recent American melody. You will occasionally hear us declaring our faith with the words of the great creeds of the church, such as the Apostles’ or Nicene Creeds. The biblical affirmations of these historic creeds remind us that we walk a path which others have walked. Our faith is their faith. Our hope is their hope. Our God is their God.

Congregational Participation

When you worship God at Christ Our King, you are in on

the action. There are prayers to pray, songs to sing, offerings to make, words to hear and a meal to eat. In all of this, you are an important part in the drama of congregational worship. You are not a spectator; you are a participant. This is also true of the youngest among us. Children are a part of this liturgical script. They have a very important part to play. God delights to hear the praises of the young (Psalm 8:2). Jesus wants the little children brought to him (Matthew 19:14). One of the practical ways we try to make this happen is by sending out an email which previews the upcoming liturgy. With the bulletin in hand by the middle of the week, parents are able to prepare their children for their upcoming roles in the Lord's Day Service. During the week, our young are nourished on the songs and stories of the faith. When we come together on Sunday, our bright-eyed five-year-olds sing and pray alongside our gray-haired saints.

A Liturgical Counter-Culture

Some worship planners criticize what they perceive to be thoughtless, irrelevant, empty tradition in liturgy. They suggest that the church should be clever and innovative, able to capture people's attention with something "relevant." At Christ Our King, we would share a similar criticism against thoughtless tradition. However, the problem with thoughtless tradition is not necessarily the *tradition* but the *thoughtlessness*. A helpful distinction is made by Jaroslav Pelikan who writes, "Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living; tradition is the living faith of the dead."

At Christ Our King, we want our faith nourished by the living faith of the dead. We believe there is much to resist in a market-driven pop culture that continually attempts to repackage God as a commodity for consumption. Rather than constantly changing the church to make it relevant to the world of "seekers," we aim to make seekers relevant to the world of God. We want strangers who come into our assembly to conclude, "God is certainly among you." We want the seeker "to fall on his face and worship God" (1 Corinthians 14:18). This isn't likely to happen if the church

isn't worshiping God in the first place.

It is our conviction that you don't overcome the occasional strangeness of worship by dumbing it down. In fact, it is our conviction that you never overcome the occasional strangeness of worship! It is not entirely natural for you and me to be in the presence of a holy God. Rather than making worship more natural for strangers by leaving God out, we want to keep God at the center and learn what it means to worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). The learning takes a bit of time. It takes immersion into the world of worship where we learn the language of prayer and confession and are trained to hear God speak to us through his Word.

The repeated quest for innovation and relevance in worship is often symptomatic of a disease. C. S. Lewis diagnosed it fifty years ago as the "liturgical fidgets." As an antidote to these fidgets, Lewis prescribed thoughtful order to the church's liturgy. He likened the church's worship to a dance saying, "a person can't forever be learning the steps to the dance; there comes a time when he needs to dance." Lewis said 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." People are still getting these sorts of fidgets today. Rather than choreograph a completely new routine each week, we think it wise to keep the rhythm of a dance that trains our attention on God. Our liturgy aims to do just that.

Our Order of Worship

It is common to hear people celebrate a notion that their church doesn't have a liturgy. The assumption that usually accompanies this declaration is that liturgy is dead and meaningless, or that it quenches the spontaneity of the Spirit. In response, we point out what should be obvious. Every church has a liturgy. Liturgy is inescapable. Liturgy, is literally, the work of the people. When we assemble at a certain time and in a certain place, when we do some things and not others, when we do something in a consistent sequence, we are doing

liturgy. The real questions are: What is the liturgy of this particular church? What are they doing and for what reasons? What convictions are expressed by what goes on here?

Our manner of worship at Christ Our King is shaped both by the wisdom of Scripture and by the witness of the church throughout history. We strive to do all things "properly and in an orderly manner" as we worship (1 Corinthians 14:40). What follows is a brief guide to our order of service.

God Calls Us into His Presence

After greeting one another upon arrival, we take a quiet moment to prepare our hearts. We call to mind that we have come to worship God in reverence and in awe (Hebrews 12:29). The minister then breaks the silence with words of welcome to the people. The minister declares that God has summoned us into his special presence. A university conference room has suddenly become the holy space of God.

God Consecrates Us

On this holy ground, where God has now caused his name to dwell among his people, we confess our sins to him. We don't always feel like confessing our sin. And yet it is right to do so. So we pray our hearts into submission. Rather than changing the liturgy to express what we feel, we try to feel what the liturgy expresses. At this point, we might pray a Psalm unto God or a written prayer of confession. Or the minister might pray on behalf of the congregation. We also include a time of private, prayer of confession. After confessing our sin, the minister calls upon the church to rise and hear the good news of the gospel, declaring that God in Christ offers forgiveness to those who confess their sin (1 John 1:9).

God Receives Our Praise

The congregation then responds to God's grace with vigorous praise. The symbolic placement of the piano at the back of the sanctuary underscores our desire to bring the praises forward to God. With John Calvin, we believe that the congregation is the church's first choir (though not necessarily her

only choir). This means that each of us is included in the church choir simply by virtue of our presence. Just as we sing to those we love, whether to a spouse or a child, it is appropriate that we sing to God and to one another (Ephesians 5:19-20). Just as we sing on occasions of joy and gladness, we rejoice in God's mercy with songs of praise.

God Calls Us to Hear His Word

God then addresses us with words from the Word. These words are read from both the Old and the New Testaments. In our liturgy, we acknowledge that what we have in the written word comes to us from God. After each public reading of Scripture, the reader declares: "This is the Word of the Lord." The congregation responds with gratitude that God has spoken to us: "Thanks be to God." Following the reading of Scripture, the minister gives the sense of the passage. Because the ancient message of Scripture had an original audience, we seek to "overhear" what God was telling them then. Because the message of Scripture continues to be living and active, we seek to hear what God is saying to us today. In other words, we are interested both in what the Bible *meant* and in what the Bible *means*. It is through this attentive listening to God that we come to know him and love him.

God Calls Us to Offer Ourselves

After God has spoken to us through the Word which has been read and preached, we respond by offering to God our tithes and offerings. Such an offering is a weekly act of worship whereby we give ourselves and the work of our hands back to God (Romans 12:1-2). By giving to God a portion of what he has first given to us (Genesis 28:20; Nehemiah 10:38; Malachi 3:10; Hebrews 7:1-5), we are declaring our dependence upon him and expressing our thanks to him. The elders receive the morning offering, carrying it to the front of the church to be consecrated in a song of prayer. Upon making an eager and cheerful offering to God (2 Corinthians 8:1-5; 9:7-12), we sing together the *Gloria Patri* ("Glory Be to the Father").

God Calls Us to His Table

We don't leave the house of God without first sitting down at his table. Jesus is our gracious host, feeding us with the bread and wine. Our practice of weekly communion grows out of the practice of the ancient church. Throughout his life, Jesus showed himself as a friend of sinners by sharing food with them (Luke 7:34). On the night of the Last Supper, he took the bread and wine of the ancient Jewish Passover feast and gave it a new meaning. He offered the broken bread to his disciples as his body broken for them. He gave them the cup of wine, representing his blood, which would soon be poured out for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 14:22-24). The earliest Christians continued this practice of table fellowship by sharing a special meal together which we variously call the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:26).

It is our practice at Christ Our King occasionally to sing a communion hymn during the distribution of the bread and wine. This appropriately expresses our joy. The Lord's Supper is not a funeral. Christ is not dead. Our mood is not one of unrelieved sorrow. As Christians, we look at the Crucifixion through the window of the Resurrection. Christ has conquered sin and Satan. He has defeated death and hell. When we sing together and share in this meal, we savor the taste of his victory over evil. By eating the bread and drinking the wine that our Lord has given us, our faith in God is nourished and our relationship with Christ is strengthened. In this memorial meal, we act out a dramatized prayer wherein we call upon God to remember his covenant with his people (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24, 25).

God Blesses Us and Sends Us Out

The concluding moment of Jesus' life on earth is also the concluding moment of our weekly liturgy. After his resurrection and before his ascension into heaven, Jesus assured his disciples of God's promises and commissioned them to their calling in the world. Then, "he lifted up his hands and blessed them" (Luke 24:50). The minister dramatically reenacts this

at the end of the Lord's Day Service. We have received the grace of God. We have been made strong with the gifts we have received. We now leave with a charge to be witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Christ. We go out with a call to embody the kingdom of Christ in work and play, at home and afar. The hands of the ministers are raised and the blessing of God is spoken. Having entered the sanctuary by the grace of God, we now leave the sanctuary with his favor resting upon us.

AN INVITATION TO WORSHIP

We end where we began. The Psalmist says, "Come! Come taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). The prophets say, "Come to the waters! Come buy wine and milk, without money and without cost" (Isaiah 55:1). The Spirit and the bride say, "Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life" (Revelation 22:17). We join the chorus and say to you: Come behold the beauty of God by worshipping with us at Christ Our King Presbyterian Church!

Author

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It has been one of our hallmarks to test both our tradition and our proposals for change with intelligent and pious interpretation of the Word of God as written in the text of Holy Scripture.

MICHAEL D. BUSH

Luther's role as a reformer grew out of his anguished quest for a gracious God. For Luther, theology was not simply the academic study of religion. Rather, it was a lifelong process of struggle and temptation. "I did not learn my theology all at once," he said, "but I had to search deeper for it, where my temptations took me. . . . Not understanding, reading, or speculation, but living—nay, dying and being damned—make a theologian."

TIMOTHY GEORGE, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* (1996)

The great theologian Karl Barth said of the church that "in Holy Scripture it has over it everywhere and always and in every respect its Lord and Judge." If the Scriptures are the "judge," then we are in deep trouble. Who can seriously doubt that the modern church stands condemned by the Bible itself for its unfaithfulness to both the message of the gospel and its inherent ethical fruit demonstrated in the lives of those who profess to believe it?

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

It is evident that all doctrine which agrees with those apostolic churches, the wombs and origins of the faith, must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing what the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God.

TERTULLIAN (160-230 A.D.), *THE RULE OF FAITH*

It was Benjamin Franklin who first coined the phrase "God helps those who help themselves." Pollster George Barna reports that over 80% of American evangelicals believe this is the teaching of the Bible. Until we see a significant decline in this practical Pelagianism I doubt that we shall see a corresponding recovery of the gospel of grace in our churches.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

In the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.

VINCENT OF LERINS (DIED 450 A.D.), *A COMMENTARY*