

***Worship Matters***  
By the Reverend Kyle Oliphint

*This is the first sermon in GCPC's Worship Matters series, in which we discuss our corporate worship service and why we worship the way we do.*

Dr. Edward Frey wrote a book devoted entirely to the importance of church architecture. In *This Before Architecture*, he offers advice to future building committees:

Think! Think before you build... Building committees like yours frequently start at the wrong end of their job. They begin busily with the problems of architecture. What will the building look like? Where will it be placed on the site? How much will it cost? The first question in a building program should be—‘What do we believe about God and why has He called us together in this place to do His work’—This is where we begin, not with architecture or finance.<sup>1</sup>

The leadership asked this and many other related questions when we embarked on both of our building programs. Let me point out some of the conscious decisions your leaders made in the building of our worship spaces.

You walk in and see the ceiling rises toward the front. We want our eyes and hearts to be pulled to God, which is why there are no big banners or crosses on these big stone walls. No distractions. The room pulls you upward.

But at the same time, it pulls you forward. You'll notice how God's primary means of grace, Word and Sacrament, are right in front and underlined for emphasis. The big, wooden pulpit is raised, and before it is the Lord's Table with the elements prepared and ready to be served. The Baptismal font is lit with its own dedicated light. Inscribed behind it are the names of all those who are baptized in this church, signifying their membership in God's Covenant community.

We considered position and accessibility when we built. We purposely chose not to have long, far-reaching rows. A semi-circle allows you to be close to God's means of grace. The last row in this room is as close as the last row in our first worship space. Although we needed an area that would hold twice as many, we didn't want that space to pull God's people further from His Word and Sacrament. The architect designed this space in such a way that we could fit more people, but the depth of the room would stay the same.

We also built this room to hold about 420 to 440 people. We believe that God has called us to know and care for one another, and to seek one another out. A little more than 400 people is as big as this church can be if we are going to be faithful to what God has called us to be: a fellowship of people who are committed to Him and one another. If or when we get bigger than that, we have two options.

The first option is to have two services. Many good and faithful churches choose to do this, but we will not. Just as we determined the shape and size of this room, we also decided to be one church, one people, with one service. We want to invest in and pray with one another, sing together, and interact with each other. As God's covenant people called to this place and time in His history, we must gather here at one particular moment to allow Him to work in us as

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Frey, *This Before Architecture* (Jenkintown, PA: Foundation Books, 1963), 6

one body. Additionally, we will never have multiple locations. We won't meet here and at an elementary school or a refurbished grocery store, beaming in the preacher while "worship leaders" lead the services at the "North Campus," "South Campus," etc. As long as I am your pastor and the elders are your elders, we will always be one church, one people, and one service.

Since we won't have two services, our second option is to plant another church somewhere. If the attendance on Sunday mornings consistently reaches 80% of capacity, which means 320 or more people, we ask a group of you to go out and begin another church with our support, financial and otherwise. Maybe some of you have been thinking about helping plant a church from our church. If so, let us know.

Our decisions and prayers about everything I've just laid out about this building have been informed by our primary concern: what God calls us to do in this place at this time. It will look a certain way and it will hold a limited number of people so that we can do what we are called to do.

We ask the same kinds of questions every week to consider what we do in this space for corporate worship. Wendell Berry said, "How we work, what work we do, how well we use the materials we use... all these are questions of the highest and gravest significance. In answering them, we practice, or do not practice, our religion."<sup>2</sup> Every Lord's Day morning, we gather here to do the work of worship. How we worship, what our worship looks like, and the materials we use in our worship are of the highest and gravest significance. We think about the *matter of worship* because *worship matters*.

Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 give us the first necessary and non-negotiable aspect of worship: God is the focus. He is the reason we built this room the way we did, and He is the reason we write and build each service every week. He is why we do what we do every week right here.

Isaiah and John were both given visions of the living God. Isaiah fell before God in worship. John was given a preview of the Heavenly Court worshipping the Lord God Almighty as the 24 elders engaged in glorious worship, casting crowns at the feet of the only One worthy of their worship. We are not given such visions. So part of our task is to enable us, as God's people, to focus on Him. As we build our worship service every week, this challenge drives us: how to faithfully hold before us the Triune God. The way we approach this challenge can be captured with one word: *liturgy*.

Our corporate worship service is guided by our liturgy. *Liturgy* literally means *public working*. It derives from two Greek words, *leitōs* and *ergos*. Through French and Latin, it came to mean a form of public worship service. In the Eastern Orthodox religion or even in Lutheran churches, the worship service may be referred to as the Divine Service, which is the same idea.

Our liturgy is purposeful and intentional. It has a beginning, middle and end with necessary parts at every step of our progression through our corporate worship service. Let's think of the liturgy at GCPC as the tracks upon which our corporate worship service runs. The tracks are predictable—we know the curves and turns and especially the destination. Each week, what runs on these tracks will be a bit different: mixed hymns and prayers, Scripture readings, and new sermons. But our liturgy moves us in the same direction every week.

Our liturgy is comprised of four *S*'s: **Stability, Scripture, Spirit, and Savior.**

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2003), 315

## **Stability**

As the people of God, we need stability and consistency in our relationship with Him. Our weeks are filled with surprises, unpredictable stresses, and demands on our time. We are not in control of any of it, but we know the One who is.

Each week, when you walk into this place and your eyes are drawn to Him, you know for certain what we will be doing. You know we will sing, hear Scripture, take the Lord's Supper, and respond by giving to God our faith and money. At the end of our service, you know you will be sent out from under the covering with a benediction, or a promise from God.

No matter what happens in your week, morning, or year, this is what you will encounter every single Lord's Day. Regardless of what we sing or what passage we hear preached on, the purpose is to do what we see done in Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4: to set before our eyes the Triune God so that we might worship Him.

What we undertake is hard work. We follow a liturgy that sometimes gently and sometimes forcefully pulls us out from under any burdens we bring with us. Our liturgy recalibrates hearts that might broil and bubble like an angry cauldron, and tries to woo unaffected or apathetic hearts back to the God who sees them. Because it is hard, we take time every Lord's Day to be quiet. This is for you to put on your "game face," or more accurately your "worship face," and ask God the Holy Spirit to enable you to worship even if you don't feel like it. We know the business we are about to engage in: a single-minded, heart-focused worship of the Triune God.

It is not the job of worship or our liturgy to work us up into a frenzy, or to create emotion in us so that our worship will be "felt." It is to faithfully and intentionally pull us toward God, and to focus our easily-distracted hearts, minds, and bodies on Father, Son and Spirit. Our liturgy provides the stability we need every week to worship as we are called to do.

## **Scripture**

Not only does our liturgy provide stability to our lives, giving us the certainty of coming here and being pulled to God in worship, but it also steeps us deeply in God's Word.

The Bible tells the story of redemption. We tell this same story with Scripture at every worship service, and it is the same story we read in Isaiah 6. The story tells us that God's presence compels worship. God's presence allows us to see ourselves as we truly are: people of "unclean lips" who live among people of "unclean lips." God's mercy to us is in His means of grace, His Word and Sacrament. And God's call to us to act as we give and leave this place in faith is the promise of God in the benediction. We tell this story every week in our corporate worship, and Scripture is the storyteller.

In the Doxology, we praise God for His blessings and receive from Him the call to come and worship, which He promises to receive. God's Word is at the heart of our worship every week. We can't help but be convicted when we approach God and when we sing and hear in prayers how holy He is and how needy we are. It is a dialogue, like we heard in Isaiah and Revelation, with God's Word speaking to us and our hearts being moved to speak back. God responds to our confession of unworthiness with words of comfort and promises. Scripture is where we seek this comfort and cling to the promises that we find there.

Throughout our service, we feed on His Word and Sacrament and we are nourished. Our faith is revived and our focus redirected. We end with celebration and thanksgiving, offering Him our money as a symbol of how everything belongs to Him and He has all of us.

This is the story of Scripture, or the story of our lives who are united through Jesus. The songs, psalms and hymns we sing are all rooted in Scripture. It is our calls to worship, God's words of comfort and promise after our prayers of confession, and the benediction. It is the reading and preaching of God's Word, and the invitation to the Lord's Table. Our prayers are rooted in Scripture. Listen for it.

The most important aspect of our liturgy is the story of Scripture told with Scripture. This is one of the reasons why we don't enter here and only sing. We need to be guided, led, helped, and reminded by the only authoritative and inerrant Word we have access to: God's Word.

## **Spirit**

As we think very broadly about the work of God's Word in worship and our liturgy, we must consider the third *S*, the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is why our worship is primarily, even fundamentally, a Christian exercise. We welcome unbelievers and the curious to join us for corporate worship, and we are very excited to have them. The Apostle Paul says that God can use the gathering of His people to bring spiritually-dead people to life by displaying their worship. But please make no mistake about this: our worship service is for believers, Christians, and members of this church. It is not an outreach service. We do not think or pray or write this service with unbelievers in mind, or even believers in mind. We think and write and pray this service with the Triune God in mind and how His people can worship Him. We do not and will not offer different kinds of worship—blended, contemporary, traditional, etc.—in order to reach more people with differing tastes.

The Spirit of God will work with the generous amount of God's Word in the hearts of God's people gathered here. We pray to Him in this service every week. As I write the service, I think about the prayers and their connection to the hymn we have just sung or to the one we are about to sing. You can find themes from the sermon in the hymns and the prayers. The Holy Spirit will take these themes, these elements of this story, and impact God's people gathered here.

We want you to have copies of the Order of Service before Sunday (usually by Thursday) so that you can review and then join us in praying for the Spirit's work through our worship together. You can find the service on our website.

## **Savior**

The fourth *S* is the purpose and point of our worship. This service is a service of worship. It is a weekly, stable, Scripture-saturated, Spirit-enabled ceremony so that Jesus might be praised for who He is and what He has done for us.

Our corporate worship service will not focus primarily on what Jesus has done for me, or for you. We will not be singing songs that testify to my relationship with Him or what He means to me. The focus will not be "me and Jesus." The focus of our corporate worship service will be on Him, Who He is, what He has done, His current reign and rule, and His constant call for us to be holy. It will be about Jesus. He will always be the beginning, middle and end of our service.

He is the One who will never leave us or forsake us. He is our eternal stability. He is the One all of Scripture is about. From Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, it is about Jesus.

The work of the Spirit of God is to point all people everywhere to the Son of God. J.I. Packer said in his book *Keep in Step with the Spirit* that the Holy Spirit is “the hidden floodlight shining on the Savior.”<sup>3</sup> This is His job, His calling in the life of God’s people, so that we might see and worship Jesus.

In the next installments, we will think about the different components of our service. I want you to know that your leadership is committed to our liturgy as it allows us to feed on Scripture and to seek the Triune God, primarily in the Person of Jesus. This kind of liturgical worship sticks to the bones of our souls and is truly a refuge for God’s people.

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<sup>3</sup> J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 57

## ***Worship Matters: The Place of Prayer***

By the Reverend Kyle Oliphint

*This is the second sermon in GCPC's Worship Matters series, in which we discuss our corporate worship service and why we worship the way we do.*

In the first sermon of our *Worship Matters* series at GCPC, we considered the thought and intention that went into building our church, and that goes into planning each and every worship service. Now we will take up the topic of prayer and the place of prayer in our corporate worship service and liturgy.

When practiced individually and privately, prayer is the banner over our lives that reads: "We are desperately needy people dependent on God." Is this banner over your life? This is our corporate confession as we worship, and it is the banner over our worship service. We are unable to worship without God enabling us to do so. We call on Him in prayer every week.

How many times would you guess we pray every Sunday morning during our corporate worship service? The answer is seven times. Does that surprise you? Count them with me...

### **Preparing for Service**

#### **Adoration/Invocation**

#### **Confession**

#### **After Reading God's Word**

#### **After the Sermon**

#### **Before the Lord's Supper**

#### **After the Lord's Supper and Before Offering**

Within an hour and a half, we pray seven times. Why? We'll consider that question as we go through our times of prayer in our liturgy.

We can say a whole lot of things about prayer, but let's start by considering one aspect of prayer that we find in our corporate worship service: reflection. Prayer is the opportunity to pause and contemplate, to take account, and assess who we are and who God is.

We see this in Psalm 86 and even in the prayer of our Savior in John 17. You probably noticed in Psalm 86 that King David often repeats these two words: "O Lord." David confesses in this prayer, and acknowledges the sovereignty of the One He prays to. The reason for confession becomes clear as we see how David starts his prayer. He is poor and needy. Needy people want an all-powerful, loving, gracious, and protecting God. We see David addressing God in just this way as he repeats "O Lord" in his prayer. The prayer in John 17 is offered for God's people by Jesus Himself just before He is arrested and crucified. Jesus goes to His Father on behalf of His people, and asks that they might be preserved, sanctified and protected.

Now what is it that these two prayers have in common? They are offered on behalf of needy people, or people that need to be preserved and protected. Prayer is the banner over our

lives and over our worship service that reads: “We are desperately needy people dependent on God.”

I probably feel the most desperate, needy, and dependent when I climb into the passenger seat of my car as I take my daughter out to practice driving. I can feel my foot almost push through the floorboard as she comes to a stop sign or a red light a bit faster than she should.

I am totally at the mercy of my fifteen-year-old driver. But I have to trust Caroline. Each time she stops, or when I ask her to pull over, it is a welcome pause when I can review with her the things she did well and the things she needs to work on. It is also an opportunity for me to wipe the sweat from my hands and for my heart rate to slow down.

Prayer provides a pause to think about what we are doing and convey our thoughts to God. We can ask Him to listen and help because we are at His mercy. We are desperately needy people dependent on Him. Prayer reminds us of this.

Let’s briefly go through each aspect of prayer in our liturgy, hoping to understand how vital it is that we pray here every Sunday morning. I hope that it will motivate you to pray more simply and more often. Allow yourself to pause and reflect to God who He is and your need for Him.

## **Preparation**

We established last week that when we plan and write our service, we do not have unbelievers in mind. We don’t even have you in mind. We have God in mind.

How can we enable God’s people to praise and worship the God who calls them together? This is the fundamental question we ask as we put our service together every week.

When you attend service, look at the first page of your bulletin. We have a place in our bulletin right under the heading that simply reads, “Silent Preparation.” Perhaps the most important moment of our worship service is the time for prayers we offer beforehand. We are to confess to God our inability to joyfully worship Him. We need Him to meet with us, to show Himself through our liturgy every week so that we might offer Him praise and worship.

Every Lord’s Day, before we begin our worship service, we encourage you to pray that the Spirit will focus your heart and mind on the God who has called you. Our time of silent preparation is a time to pause and remember why we are here, Who it is that has called us here, and what it is He has called us to do. It is preparation for the hard work of worship.

Unlike most of our prayers in corporate worship, the preparation is a silent prayer between you and God. No one is leading—we simply bow our heads and pray to be prepared to offer God worship. It is tempting to daydream, to think about what comes next in our day, to review the fight you had with the kids on the way to church, or the shameful way you acted at last night’s party. These are distractions taking you off the task of prayerfully preparing for worship. If you do not set your heart and mind on worship at this point, your worship will be sporadic. You’ll want the songs or the prayers or the sermon to do for you what only the Spirit

can do: bring you genuine joy as a blood-bought worshipper of the Triune God. Please focus every week during our silent time of preparation.

## **Adoration/Invocation**

Near the beginning of our corporate worship service every week is a prayer of adoration or a prayer of invocation. These early prayers always fall after the Doxology and a scriptural call to worship, and either before or after a hymn.

In these prayers, we are responding to what we've heard about God. They are our opportunity to ponder Who our God is. One morning, as Psalm 86 informed a good bit of our worship service, we repeated David's words from the psalm in the call to worship. Our opening hymn—YHWH, or The Lord is our Salvation—had the same emphasis. This was David's prayer and this is our hymn.

Our Prayer of Adoration was from Psalm 136, known by the Jewish people as the "Great Psalm of Praise." In one sense, it is a perfect template for prayer, allowing us to reflect on Who God is, what He has done, while claiming the promise He has made to us. His steadfast love endures forever.

When you respond in that prayer with the same words about God's eternal and enduring love, does the truth feel repetitive? Does it seem like words with little meaning? If so, this is where your heart has abandoned the hard work of worship. Pause and reflect, again, on these truths: this good God who created and rules all things sought you in your low estate to save you; He is the One, the only One who can be trusted and counted on, as He tells you over and over that His steadfast love endures forever; and He will never, ever stop loving you!

Every week in our prayer of adoration or our prayer of invocation, we work hard to hold before you the Triune God, as revealed in Scripture. A service that is saturated in Scripture that reveals God on every page is a service that compels worship.

## **Confession**

In Scripture, when God is revealed to His people, there is always a brokenness that comes to the surface. God's Holiness does not compel sinners to worship, but it does cause sinners to collapse.

We must confess who we are apart from Jesus and seek Him in prayer. Our Prayer of Confession is the central part of our worship service; it is in the exact middle of our liturgy.

We've been exposed to God by His gracious condescension. We sense our own unworthiness, so we avail ourselves of His mercy and grace as we obediently confess to Him our sins. This pause during our worship service provides us an opportunity for introspection, allowing us to assess our needs and how God has met them.

The Prayer of Confession is restorative and redemptive worship. We pause and reflect on what God has done for us through His Son, Jesus. It is in our Prayer of Confession that we affirm



together how our Heavenly Father answers Jesus' prayer for us in John 17. Through confession, repentance, and seeing the truth of us and Him in His Word, we are being sanctified and made more holy.

This is further evidence of how His steadfast love endures forever. Even as we continually, habitually give ourselves over to sin, the Triune God seeks us out and retrieves us. His commitment to us, as His people, will never be broken. He gave us His Son as His commitment to love us forever.

### **After Reading God's Word**

We must always pause and pray into our souls the nourishment of God's Word.

In the *Directory for Public Worship*, written by the same men who wrote the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, it says of this prayer:

“After reading the Word, the minister who is to preach is to endeavor to get his own and his hearers hearts to be rightly affected...”<sup>4</sup>

Prayer is a confession of our dependence on the ministry of God for our good. We must remind ourselves after the reading and before the preaching of His Word that we are hopeless to receive any benefit from His Word without His ministry in our lives.

At a Ligonier Ministries conference, Dr. Sinclair Ferguson said something like, “the Ministry of the Word from the pulpit ought to jump down and run around, doing its work among the people of God.” This is a great visual, and one that is wholly dependent on the Spirit of Jesus being in us. Thus, we pause and pray for it to “jump down and around” after we have read His Word and before we sit for the preaching of His Word.

### **After the Sermon**

After every sermon, when His primary means of Grace has just been distributed to us, we stop to assess the work of the Spirit in and for us.

We are tempted to assess the sermon, grabbing a practical truth here and there, and go on our merry way. But we must stop and remember that God is doing something supernatural. He is meeting with us and using the double-edged sword of His Word to cut through the hard callousness of our hearts, nourishing the tender shoots of faith, and encouraging all of us in the pursuit of holiness.

If we are left to ourselves after the sermon, without prayer, we become self-focused. We evaluate the sermon based on whether it was boring or exciting, helpful or not so much. We may rehearse in our private thoughts all the annoying little things the preacher does, or how he fell short this week in touching us. Without the work of prayer before and after the sermon, every thought and assessment is self-referential. It is only about you. This is why we must pause and

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Dever and Sinclair Ferguson, *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (Tain, Scotland: Christian Heritage, 2009), 87

remember that the Holy Spirit is pulling our eyes off of ourselves and focusing them on Jesus. We pray that the Ministry of the Word will be used by God the Holy Spirit to make us look at Jesus and be more and more like Him, as we are convicted, encouraged, and called to repentance.

### **Before the Lord's Supper**

After the sermon, we return to Scripture to remind ourselves yet another way God has met us: by feeding us the elements in the Supper. We want God to use His means for our good and His glory in this meal.

We pause before we gather at the Lord's Table to consider again why we eat. We want to remember why it was necessary for Jesus to die, and why we are profoundly unworthy of His sacrifice but so desperately and eternally in need of it.

It is easy for us to casually come forward, take, eat, and return. We do it every week, so we must protect ourselves from the danger of it becoming rote and thoughtless. Our prayer before we eat is an opportunity to check our hearts and think about this supernatural act we are invited to partake in.

### **After the Lord's Supper and Before Offering**

The last prayer included in our corporate worship service is a Prayer of Commendation. It isn't listed that way in your bulletin. In fact, it isn't listed at all. But it is the prayer that follows our eating of the Lord's Supper and precedes the giving of our money to God.

In this prayer, we commend to God our whole lives. Now that He has nourished us with His Word and Sacrament, He has prepared us to go out into His world and pursue faithfulness. It is a prayer of thanksgiving.

But we are also commending to God, by faith, our generous giving. We will devote a whole sermon to this final aspect of our worship service, discussing the Offering and Benediction and how they are tied together. But before we give to God our money, we want to pause and remember that we would have nothing if it weren't for His gracious giving. We have jobs, health, money, productivity, and everything else because God, as we sing in the Doxology, is a God of blessing!

Prayer is a huge part of our worship. It provides a break. We stop. We don't sing. We don't simply listen, but knit our hearts together to remember and reflect on who God is, what He has provided, and how He has equipped us. We remember that He is in control and that we are needy.

There are a thousand things we can say about prayer. We can pull so much from Psalm 86 and John 17. But this is what I want you to understand:

In your life, like in our service, it is easy for us to think we have things under control, that "we've got this." But it is impossible for me to think I have any sense of control when I am in the passenger seat and Caroline is driving. I'd be a fool if I thought I was in control of the car she is

steering. Prayer in our lives functions as a subtle reminder that we are not in control, but greatly needy. So, pause your life, stop your thoughts, stop your temper, stop your anxiety, stop your complaining, and pray.

We pray a minimum of seven times in our hour and a half together every Lord's Day. Imagine if this was your practice every day—short little moments of pause, reflection and brief prayers, assessing where you are, Who has you there, and seeking to see Him. It would be a healthy, consistent God-glorifying reminder of your dependence on the One Who Has you.

You have access to your Triune God every day, all day, 365 days a year. He is never gone. He doesn't screen calls. He indwells you and hears you when you pray. His steadfast love endures forever. Pause, reflect and pray. Your life will be full of worship.

## ***Worship Matters:***

By the Reverend Davis W. Morgan

*This is the third sermon in GCPC's Worship Matters series, in which we discuss our corporate worship service and why we worship the way we do.*

One of the earliest memories I have as a child is singing hymns with my mother as we drove home from church every Sunday. It was a 45-minute drive so that was a lot of singing. She did this because at the church I was raised in there was “hymn memorization” where if you sang ten hymns *by memory* you would be invited to the annual choir banquet every May.

Now as a young boy, I looked forward to that banquet every year not because I had to dress up but because I got a trophy with my name on it and I got to eat all the chocolate cake I wanted. It was a great night. It made all that singing worth it to a 5 yr old boy.

But the thing that I didn't understand then that I understand now was that my mother was laying a theological foundation down that was richly made of Scripture (written proclamation) and hymns (musical proclamation).

As a child I didn't really understand why we sang hymns in church other than that's what you do when you go to church – you sing hymns. But God in His mercy, worked patiently with my ignorance starting first of His Word and then with the vital role singing has in the life of His people.

That's what I want us to understand here at the beginning: *the vital role that singing has in the worship service – not because that's what worship is, it's part of it – but because of its role as complimenting the ministry of the Word.*

**\*\*\*Singing is the lyrical proclamation of Scripture**, further aiding the preaching of the Word as Paul says in Colossians 3 so that the “Word of Christ might dwell in us richly.

We are continuing our mini-series on why worship matters this week and how we here at GCPC are very thoughtful & intentional in our liturgy.

The first week Kyle set the table for why we do what we do every Lord's Day. That above everything else, we see this service as God's service – *it is about Him reminding us of who He is and what He is actively doing in the world and in our lives as He calls us to gather together and receive from Him His means of grace every week.*

And so He sets the agenda so to speak of how we are to worship Him. This is not just something we do on Sunday mornings but this is ***the most important thing we do every week – meeting and communing with our covenant God.***

Last week we heard about the place and importance of prayer in our worship service. Prayer reminds us of our desperation and needfulness before God and so we intentionally pray throughout the service asking God to do what only He can do:

- reveal Himself to us by His Word and Spirit,
- illuminate our hearts to see the beauty and glory of Jesus,
- assure us of His grace and forgiveness,

- and remind us of our identity as part of His new creation born again by the Holy Spirit, able to go out from here as His light and face whatever darkness may come our way.

Prayer plays an essential role in doing this. It has a steady rhythm in this service in hopes that it will have a steady rhythm in our daily lives.

In a similar way, **the place of singing has a steady rhythm in our worship service as our response to God’s goodness and holiness.**

This is song and singing has always operated through covenant history. Perhaps the most well known example of this in the OT is in Exodus 15 after YHWH has delivered His people as He promised He would from Pharaoh and their bondage in Egypt.

They have just witnessed the awesome power of YHWH in splitting the Red Sea for their salvation and the drowning of the Egyptians in their damnation and in verse 1 it says this,

- Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD saying, “I will sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously, the horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and *my song*, and He has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise Him, my father’s God, and I will exalt Him.”

The song continues: “In the greatness of Your majesty You overthrow Your adversaries; You send out Your fury and it consumes them like stubble.

Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

You have led in Your steadfast love the people whom You have redeemed...”

The emphasis being on who YHWH is and the awesome wonders and redemption He has worked for His people. He acts and they respond with song and praise.

When we come to the NT, the revelation of God and His redemptive purposes comes to a climax with the coming of His Son into the world.

We read in 1 Corinthians 1, that in Christ Jesus we have wisdom from God, we have righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. *He has become our salvation in other words.*

Therefore, like His people in Exodus, when we come together we are responding what God has done for us through our own Passover Lamb – the Lord Jesus –and our own Red Sea crossing – His death and resurrection for us.

This is how Paul essentially begins this section of Colossians by reminding them of what God has done for them in Christ and then applying that to their lives together as the Church.

He starts by applying it in how we treat one another and how love, peace, and thanksgiving are to be what rules our hearts now...

And then he says how we are to accomplish that in verse 16 by letting the Word of Christ dwell – *live* – in us richly & abundantly, teaching and admonishing (instructing) one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in our hearts to God.

**Singing is the means that Paul is emphasizing here. Singing is the lyrical proclamation of Scripture**, further aiding the ministry of the Word.

He already talked about the centrality of that ministry for the health of the church in 1:28 where he says, “Christ we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, *so that* we may present everyone mature in Christ.” There the emphasis on the preaching ministry: proclaiming who Jesus is, warning and teaching, unfolding the implications and applications → that is central to maturing in Christ Paul says.

Now he says here in 3:16 that the singing ministry of the Word further aids in our maturing in Christ (that the Word of Christ would dwell (live in us richly and abundantly!))

So one of the main purposes of singing is teaching and instructing through the use of hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs so that the Word of Christ might live in the hearts of His people.

Notice also that our singing is to be Christocentric → focused on the Word of Christ and our singing is responsive – responding in thanksgiving to what God has done for us.

This Paul says, is essential to the life of the church! It is essential to how we treat one another – our participation in teaching and admonishing one another through the lyrical ministry of the Word – the richness that we get from singing together.

We must be, therefore, well-informed about our lyrical ministry here at Grace. In our time remaining I want to answer some very simple and practical questions about **why we sing in this service, who we are addressing when we sing, how we are to sing, what we sing, and what our singing accomplishes.**

Those are the questions I want you to be able to answer and discuss with your family later this afternoon and week.

I don’t want you to miss the eternal significance of what is going on here every week through the lyrical ministry of singing.

## **I. Why Do We Sing?**

Why do we sing? Why not yell or whisper? Why not acting or simply reading the lyrics out loud?

What is the significance of *singing*? Like we saw in Exodus 15 singing is about responding to who God is.

Singing is about covenant – God and His people – coming together and His people rejoicing and celebrating the fact that God has overcome the estrangement that once existed between He and us.

This is why we are commanded to sing → we are responding to our covenant God: We are remembering His Word and actions.

We are to “sing a new song to the Lord FOR He has done marvelous things!” (Ps 98) and we are teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with thanksgiving to God for what He has done for us in Christ (Col 3:16).

So yes we are commanded, but as John says in 1 John 5, His commands are not burdensome because He has done great things for us! He has a whole track record of creating, redeeming, and preserving His people therefore, we respond back to Him in singing for our singing is also an act of worship.

We are not only responding to what God has done but we are responding to who He is.

- “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever.
- He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
- As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

The Psalmist is responding to WHO God is → He is a Father full of compassion and grace, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness and this causes David to respond in jubilant praise.

Our singing in our worship service has this role; it is pointing us away from ourselves and exalting the God who has adopted us as His children.

We start our service this way each week by singing the doxology fixating both our physical and spiritual eyes on the God from whom we receive grace upon grace.

We adore this God so much that we also implore all of creation and all of heaven to join us in praising the God who eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So we start there to remind us of who God is and why He is worthy of all worship. Next:

## **II. Who are We Addressing in Song?**

This is extremely important to know—for whom and to whom are we singing?

In our hymn of praise this morning, *Praise to the Lord* the subject of the hymn is the Lord Almighty, the King of creation while the object – who the hymn is addressing – starts with us, “O my soul, praise Him” then moves out to “All ye who hear” and finally in the last verse “All that have life & breath come now with praises!”

The hymn is galvanizing all of creation to praise the Lord, pointing at His greatness and goodness as self-evident reasons for praising Him. But notice especially how it addresses the soul, aiming for the heart where our affections, thoughts, desires, and true worship begin.

**Or our hymn of preparation – *Be Still My Soul***

Here's a hymn about suffering: the pain and sorrows of life, the death of loved ones and even our own death and how our relationship with the Father and the Son speaks directly to our suffering.

We are addressing our own souls here, reminding ourselves that the Lord is on our side, that He will provide, in every change in life He remains faithful which He will guide us until we are forever in His presence.

So this hymn has a very high view of God's sovereignty – it doesn't pretend to think that God has nothing to do with the suffering we undergo, it's the exact opposite!

He is with us in the midst of it whether it is self-inflicted by us with a particular sin or something outside of us that comes against us, the hymn is reminding us that Jesus is with us and we will come to better know His love and heart for us as a result.

Look now with me at the closing hymn, I especially want you to notice this with '**How Firm a Foundation**'.

The first verse is us addressing one another, reminding us of the sure foundation that God's Word is, that everything we need for life and godliness God has provided in His inerrant Word.

But then in verses 2-5 you noticed that those verses are in quotation marks – someone else is doing the addressing → **“Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed, for I am your God and will still give you aid.”** Here God is the one addressing us! The hymn is quoting from Isaiah 41 and 43 as well as taking from Hebrews 13:5 and reminding us of the specific promises that God have given us.

Our singing is not only for the benefit of the Body as a whole but also for us individually, with God addressing each one of us. So depending on the hymn and where it fits in the service, we are either addressing one another, our own hearts, God or He is addressing us.

### III. How are We to Sing?

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14 that when we sing we are sing with our spirit and with our mind – this fits with what the Psalms say about singing not being merely a mental act, but a spiritual and emotional one as well.

When we sing in worship, we are to be engaged spiritually and mentally, thinking about the story we are telling in our singing, moving from the doxology, to praise, to preparation for confession of our sins, to response after hearing the words of comfort and promise, back to preparation for hearing from God Himself in His Word, then as we sing coming down for communion, our singing focuses on the Lord Jesus and the redemption He accomplished for us, and then with our closing hymn we are focusing is on the stability that our covenant God has provided for us to leave here and go out into the world.

And all of this is happening within the context of our communal life together – our singing is teaching and instructing one another which implies that you and I individually, are participating in the singing so that *we communally*, are being edified by the lyrical proclamation of God's Word.



When we don't engage in the lyrical ministry of the Word, it's typically for one of three reasons:

1. We're uncomfortable with the music either in reading it or in singing it;
2. We're uncomfortable with singing out, worried about what others might think if they heard us try to hit all the notes;
3. We'd rather listen than sing, thinking that we can participate just the same as though we were singing.

To each of those I would respond by pointing you to Paul's words in Colossians – your singing isn't primarily about your comfort or preference, it's about US with one voice teaching and being taught, instructing and being instructed, so that the Word of Christ *will live in US!*

That's why singing out is so important. You aren't singing out for your benefit but for those around you and when you refrain from singing it doesn't just affect you but those around you.

We as a community are aiding in the ministry of the Word as we sing and the Word of Christ is richly deposited into the hearts and minds of God's people.

For those of you who don't know June 12, 2015 is a very big day. That is the day that Jurassic World opens in theaters here in the US. I have already lined up a baby sitter for my wife and I's "Jurassic Date."

I was 10 when Jurassic Park opened in 1993 and I can still remember sitting in the theatre and being absolutely terrified as the Velociraptors stalked Lex and Tim. It was great.

But what makes that movie really stand out in my mind is **the soundtrack**. *The soundtrack accompanies the movie, aiding in telling the story and allowing the story to resonate with us long after the film is over.*

Likewise, our corporate singing in the divine service is the "soundtrack" to the ministry of the Word and the sermon itself, seeking to engage our hearts and minds with the drama that is unfolding from God's Word so that what we hear resonates with us long after the service is over.

If you keep that mind, that YOU, by your singing, you are aiding in the ministry of the Word, you are contributing to the soundtrack of the sermon, that will help you to see that above else, your singing is something much bigger than whether you like a particular hymn or not or can hit all the notes.

**You are contributing to the greatest story ever told.**

This is one of the primary aims of your pastors as we choose the particular hymns each week.

We are thinking of how they are going to aid in the story that God is telling through the ministry of His Word and how they are going to engage you and your family as you participate in the story as well.

**What are we to sing?**

We are told in Colossians 3, “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,” which Paul uses interchangeably implying as Calvin said, “all kinds of songs” but these songs are to be<sup>5</sup>:

**Theocentric:** Trinitarian, Covenantal, Redemptive Historical, Biblical

**Sacred:** Written for the church, not this generation or that generation. We come to church to hear, see, sing, and eat what we cannot hear, see, sing, or eat anywhere else on earth →

**REMINDER: We are tasting the powers of the age to come every time we come together on the Lord’s Day<sup>6</sup>.**

**Folk:** Written to pass on the historical faith from generation to generation, transcendent – “calling us away from the mundane and ordinary,”

Therefore, what we sing is highly significant<sup>7</sup> – it is not going to sound like what you would hear turning on the radio, as a matter of fact there are not any radio stations that I know of in DFW that routinely play psalms and hymns which to me testifies to this very fact – our music isn’t like any other type of music.

It is sacred and folk, which means it’s not mundane and trivial like the music we hear on the radio.

**Congregational:** We’re intentional in trying to choose the psalms, hymns, and songs that are best for congregational worship.

We are singing, with one voice, the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints – the faith that is shared by grandparents, parents, and children alike.

The faith that is shared by all races, ethnicities, and social classes – all of that comes together when we come together as a congregation and what we sing reflects that.

#### **IV. What Does Our Singing Accomplish?**

*The Word of Christ richly indwelling you no matter what life may bring.*

The lyrical ministry of the Word is designed to strengthened our confidence and trust so that our lives are anchored by the Word of Christ.

Two weeks ago my father died after a yearlong battle with lung cancer. One of the last things he asked of me was to do his memorial service, to which I agreed to do.

There haven’t been too many things in my life that have been more difficult that preparing to preach for that service.

But as I prepared I keep thinking about the lyrics of the hymn we sung this morning:

- Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart, And all is darkened in the vale of tears,  
Then shalt thou better know his love, his heart, Who comes to soothe thy sorrow and thy fears.  
Be still, my soul: thy Jesus can repay

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin, John, and John Pringle. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.* Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Michael S. Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> Ken Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, 1989.

From his own fullness all he takes away.

That has ministered to me and reminded me of God's faithfulness through this season of grief.

It has anchored me in God's love and care of me and my family now, and His faithfulness in the future. And that is because our singing is:

**Eschatological** – focuses on God's faithfulness throughout covenant history to His people — past, present, future — all the way to the Heavenly Jerusalem!

- Our singing points back to what God has done in Christ,
- What Christ is doing now through His Word & Spirit,
- And what Christ will do in the future in coming back for us and bringing the consummated kingdom to earth where we will reign and live and fellowship and worship with Him and His Father and the Spirit for all eternity —> THIS IS WHY WE SING, WHAT SINGING PROCLAIMS!

Every week we are reminded of this glorious hope – that we are not just living in the here and now, but we are pilgrims traveling to that great heavenly City that God has prepared for us.

Our liturgy is set up to remind us that we are part of a story bigger than our individual lives, that we are not alone in our sorrows and suffering, but that we are all one in Christ Jesus – and what we do here on Sunday mornings, particularly when we lift up our voices in song, is preparing for us “an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”

We are not just singing because that's what we do when we go to church, we are singing because the powers of the Age to come are here and now and God in His infinite love and mercy, calls us to come and taste His goodness and we respond in praise, adoration, confession, and joy.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – amen.

## ***Worship Matters: Two Confessions, Two Realities***

By the Reverend Kyle Oliphint

*This is the fourth sermon in GCPC's Worship Matters series, in which we discuss our corporate worship service and why we worship the way we do.*

We've looked at the importance and place of prayers and hymns in our corporate worship service. Now we will get a little more specific as we consider the mid-point of our worship service: confessions.

There are two confessions at this point in our service, and they are here on purpose. At this part of our worship service, we confront the most real reality every single one of us face. We are reminded that we must confess our sin so that we can profess our faith.

Al Groves was one of my Old Testament professors when I was in seminary. He died of cancer about eight years ago. While he was sick and knew he was going to die, he found comfort in the small little collection of eleven psalms known as the Psalms of the Sons of Korah.

Korah was a Levitical priest who led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. With this rebellion came swift judgment, and Korah and his family were swallowed up by the earth. You can read about his rebellion in Numbers 16. After, the family name Korah brought about shame. They were identified as the family that attempted to overthrow God's men and rebelled against God Himself.

If you read through the book of Numbers and reach Numbers 26, you might be surprised to see that the family line of Korah was not destroyed. The book reminds us what Korah had done, the judgment that fell upon him and his family, and then states, "But the sons of Korah did not die." The psalms come immediately afterward. Many generations later, God uses the Sons of Korah to produce inspired prayers for God's people. The descendants of Korah are restored to be ministers in God's house, producing these glorious prayers.

Al Groves recognized these psalms as concrete, palpable, restorative and profound grace that delivered the lost and shamed family back to God. God uses the family to give us some of the sweetest prayers found in the Bible.

The Sons of Korah possessed what they had no right to own. They had to look beyond themselves for hope, to be lifted up and rescued. They were, to use their language, "uncircumcised dogs," and not worthy of the company of other people due to the shameful acts of their ancestors. Yet, they were restored to minister in the presence of God and His people.

This is the rhythm of our *Two Confessions, Two Realities* sermon: rejecting God in our Sin, and being restored to God by Faith.

### **Confession of Sin—Broken**

Our first confession is the Confession of Sin. This is the world we we've been born into, and carry within us. Sin. Brokenness. We are Korah by nature, rebelling against God.

Consider the character Pig Pen from Charlie Brown and the “Peanuts” comic strips. Everywhere he walked, little poofs of dirt and dust would surround him to show that he was always dirty. The dirt wasn’t just on him, but carried around and deposited everywhere he went in these little dust clouds.

Pig Pen’s connection to dirt is like all people and their relationship with sin. It isn’t that sinners are just covered in sin, but sinners stain everything they touch with sin. Sinners deposit bits of brokenness everywhere they go.

In the middle of our service, we want to acknowledge this in worship, to confess our sinfulness, and bring our brokenness before the One we worship. Think about when our Confession of Sin occurs in our worship service. We always begin our service with praise and adoration; it is always profoundly God-centered with Scripture and singing. Having praised and worshipped God as He has revealed Himself to us, we then realize that we have not known Him as we should. We’ve rejected Him, His wisdom, His grace, His power, and His love. We have not feared Him or served Him. As we praise God, we must come to terms with our own unworthiness, so we have our Confession of Sin right then.

Either Davis or I will begin our Prayer of Confession by praying out loud for us. And then, every week, there is an extended time of silence when we all confess our individual sin to our Heavenly Father.

In this silent, individual time of confession we lose the corporate-ness of our worship service, just for a few minutes. It is the one part of our service when we are not praying out loud together, singing together, listening together, or eating together. We are individual, disconnected people confessing silently our sin to God.

This isolation illustrates the ultimate result of sin if it goes unchecked. The consequences of unrepentant sin are separation and destruction. Sin seeks to destroy; it destroys marriages and relationships, but most critically, sin’s goal is to tear us away from Jesus and His people. Unchecked sin becomes a razor-sharp instrument that will eventually sever our connection with Jesus. And with that severing we will no longer be welcomed as members of the church of Jesus Christ. We will want nothing more to do with Him or His people.

Ongoing rebellion and unrepentant sin builds a wall between you and Jesus. It creates a roadblock between you and the table in front.

This is why our church and all true churches must practice biblical discipline. One particular act of discipline the Elders of the church may pass onto an unrepentant member is to bar them from the Lord’s Table. Until the member has shown true repentance for whatever sin he or she has confessed, the member is not provided the privilege of communing at the Lord’s Table. It is called Communion because the community of God’s people gather together to commune with the Lord Jesus around the sacrament. Of course, the most serious disciplinary act Elders can pass is excommunication, a cut-off from God and His people. God doesn’t open up the earth and swallow up rebellious sinners anymore, like He did with Korah. Now, He has left it to His church and her leaders to cut off from the Body of Christ the unrepentant and the rebellious.

So, our Prayer of Confession is a call to remember the destructive nature of sin; we are always in danger of being in sin's grip and being pulled away from Jesus and one another.

This time of confession to our God becomes restorative and preparatory as we move towards communion together at the Lord's Table. Our Prayer of Confession is the necessary means of remaining one people united to One Savior who will be gathering at His table just a few moments later in the same service.

In closing this time of silent and individual confession, I pray out loud and gratefully for the forgiveness we have in Jesus. The ultimate result is that we are united to Him and to one another... we are the Body of Christ and close our prayer of confession as the Body of Christ.

At the end of our Prayer of Confession, we desperately want and need our connectedness—we want to belong to Jesus and to each other. We are reminded that His work has cleansed us from our sin, knocked down every barrier, and destroyed every hindrance standing in the way of rich fellowship with Him and one another.

We hear about the forgiveness of sin, every week, in the Words of Comfort and Promise. One morning it was the declaration from Romans 5 that we have peace with God through Jesus... we've been justified and stand before God covered in Jesus.

How can we not then, as the corporate body of Christ, stand and sing about what God has done for us in Jesus by singing back to Him Who He is and what He has done? We celebrate in our song of response and it truly is a celebration! In our hymns and Words of Comfort and Promise, as Tony Reinke says in his biography of John Newton, we are reminded that, "Indwelling sin is not the chief identity of the Christian. The Christian finds his identity in union to the Chief Shepherd."<sup>8</sup>

The truth is that we are not like Pig Pen, walking around soiling everything we touch with our sin, but that we have been redeemed and restored and are being made more and more holy by our Shepherd King and His love. Confession of Sin is cleansing, as 2 Chronicles 7:11-18 promises. God returns to us, heals us, turns His ear to us and commits Himself to us. If there are puffs of anything coming up as we walk, it is puffs of growing holiness, little clouds of sanctification as we walk repentantly and in union with Jesus. They are puffs of assurance and encouragement as we hear and sing the truths after confessing our sin and receiving the forgiveness promised in Jesus.

Do you see the path of corporate worship to this point and why we confess when we confess? Do you see how our prayer of confession at this part of our service can illustrate for us what happens if we don't confess? It is the most chilling part of our time together. By the Spirit's aid, we experience what it feels like to be cut off during our silent, individual confession right in the middle of our corporate worship. But then we pull out of this isolation and begin to soar again as we hear God's promise and receive His comfort from His Word, and we sing as one people a hymn to the Triune God.

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Reinke, *Newton on the Christian Life: To Live Is Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 115.

## Confession of Faith—Unity

After the hymn of celebration, our corporate worship includes the recitation of a Confession of Faith, or a declaration of unity that spans the world and multi-millennia. Our Confession of Sin was silent and individualistic, but our Confession of Faith is boisterous and united.

One morning's Confession of Faith was the Nicene Creed, one of the oldest creeds, that has been recited by believers since, most likely, the mid-fourth century.

We speak a lot about being united to the Lord Jesus, an unmatched and glorious truth with riches that we will not fully realize until we see Him as He is. But in this part of our service, we put words to our shared union with all those who are in Christ. We recite the words others have been speaking for centuries.

Almost 10 years ago, I worshipped with and had the privilege of preaching to two different congregations in the Philippines. In that service, I got the most teary-eyed when we recited the Apostles' Creed in English. I knew my church family at home, which met at the Bette Perot Elementary School, was going to recite these very same truths almost thirteen hours later in Texas.

Christians everywhere repeat these words as a demonstration and expression of our unity together. Some recite in secret house churches in China with hushed voices; others in the Middle East recite these words knowing that it could cost them their lives.

In one sense, our recitation of the Confession of Faith like the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed both are an expression of Revelation 7:9, which says, "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands."

There in Revelation, they were proclaiming out loud, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb..." That is what John saw in Heaven.

But the Confession of Faith is a joining of voices. They are voices from far away, or from ones who have long since joined those in Heaven proclaiming that Salvation belongs to the Lord. Our voices are all joined in this moment of corporate worship.

Think for a minute about the "Faith" part of our Confession of Faith. As the elders lead us in this part of our worship, they will let us know what we are confessing, and they will begin to lead us by asking, "Christian, What do you believe?"

The purpose of this is to say, out loud and together, what your faith means. In the Nicene Creed, you professed out loud to one another what you believe about the Triune God you worship.

It isn't a Confession of Faith about all you believe about the Triune God, but this is, most definitely, what you believe, what we must believe to be a part of God's huge family.

Sometimes our Confession of Faith will be from the Westminster Confession of Faith or the Shorter or Larger Catechisms. Sometimes we confess our faith using the Belgic Confession

or the Heidelberg Catechism. But in every case, we recite a ridiculously long line of saints who came before us, and speak these same beautifully glorious truths.

Now, let your mind travel to 150 years in the future. If the Lord Jesus hasn't returned by then, people not even born yet will be standing in our church saying the same words we say. In God's wonderful providence, the words in our Confession of Faith have a supernatural ability to echo throughout the ages. In God's abundant grace and mercy, your great, great grandchildren will be saying these words as they stand here with their families worshiping the God whose presence we will be enjoying. Do you understand the connection, the shared faith we enjoy?

Our Confession of Faith has very practical and immediate ministry for us each week. Together, we respond to the question, "Christian, what do you believe?" We speak with mouths of faith, and all of us are at different places in our faith.

For all of us who struggle with doubt, who feel as if God is very far from us and struggle with the assurance of faith, who seem to be chained to a dominating or besetting sin, or whose prayer life is anemic, the Confession of Faith has an empowering aspect to it. No matter where you are, you know that you stand in a long line of fellow believers, strugglers, and weak-souled people who said the same thing. But more importantly, you are standing next to a blood-bought believer who, with a strong voice, is confessing truths that are hard for you at this moment. So you might listen and only whisper the words, but the boldness of speech of those who surround you strengthens you. This is God-given power. It is the power to say that you may not know much, you may be doubting a lot, you may not be completely assured in your faith during your current battle with sin, and you may feel very far from God...But you know this:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth,  
Of all things visible and invisible.  
And We believe In one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,  
Begotten of His Father before all worlds,  
God of God, Light of Light,  
Very God of very God,  
Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;  
By Whom all things were made;  
We believe Who for us and our salvation  
He Came down from heaven,  
And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary,  
And was made man;  
We Believe And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;  
He suffered and was buried;  
And on the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,  
And ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the  
Father;  
And We Believe He shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the  
dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end.  
And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life,



Who proceeds from the Father and the Son;  
Who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified;  
Who spoke by the prophets;  
And we believe in one holy catholic\* and apostolic church;  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins;  
And we look for the resurrection of the dead,  
And the life of the world to come. Amen.

Just as God redeemed and restored the Sons of Korah, we remember, in the middle of our worship service, that God is doing the same thing with us. Confession of Sin and Confession of Faith are two confessions and two realities of one people.

## ***Worship Matters: Forever Food***

By the Reverend Kyle Oliphint

*This is the fifth sermon in GCPC's Worship Matters series, in which we discuss our corporate worship service and why we worship the way we do.*

In our *Worship Matters* series so far, we've thought about the place of prayer, singing and confession in our corporate worship service every week. I hope you are picking up on the theme that runs through it all: Every aspect of our worship service is to draw us to the Triune God.

Mike Glodo, who teaches preaching at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, makes the point that corporate worship is a dialogue. God's people speak to God in songs, prayers, and confessions of faith, and God speaks to His people through His Word, which is read and preached, and through the administration of the sacraments. We hear from God and we listen.

In this sermon, we will think together about the place in our corporate worship service where God speaks to us through the reading and preaching of His Word. This will not be a sermon on God's Word but instead the place of God's Word in our worship service.

First, let's think about what preaching is and what it's not. In thinking it through this way, I hope, we will gain a better sense of our time at this point in our service, and also a greater appreciation for the entire worship service.

### **I. Preaching is NOT...**

There are two things we must understand that preaching is not, or ought not to be.

#### **A. Preaching is not the most important part of our time together every Lord's Day.**

In other words, corporate worship service is not all about the sermon. It is a necessary and vital part, but not the most important part of our service.

Matthew Henry said this to his congregation: "You should have come here to pray as much as to hear a sermon." I'd add that you should have come here to sing as much as to hear the sermon. You should have come here to celebrate the sacraments as much as to hear the sermon. You should have come here to confess your sins and your faith as much as to hear the sermon.

I hope you're picking up in this brief series that our corporate worship service is about making much of God. Every aspect seeks to display Him and hold Him before us.

If we begin to think that the sermon is the most important part of the service, then everything else might be considered just fluff. Setting our minds right about this can protect us

from a danger that every church faces: building the service on the personality of the preacher or a specific program.

From the very start of Grace Community Presbyterian Church, we've been fond of saying we are planting this church for our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Part of the thinking behind this is that the church will be built upon the only One who will endure: the Triune God and His Word.

If we construct a church around a particular personality or a particular program, we set in stone the end of the church with the end of that program or personality.

This is one of the reasons we do what we do the way we do it on Sunday morning. Davis and I lead the entire service because we believe it is one of the most important and primary means of shepherding God's people. Singing, praying, reading and preaching are the means of shepherding and leading God's people. So as long as I am your pastor, we won't have a "worship leader," who will stand and lead the singing until it is time for the preacher to get up and preach. Do you see how, at least in the way we think about worship, this can make an unfortunate distinction in what we do during worship?

There is the singing and participatory part of the service, lead by a dynamic, talented, and musically gifted person. When that is finished, everyone sits down, and the performers put their instruments down and walk off the platform. And in walks the preacher, Bible in hand, ready to preach. This tends to distinguish what is happening. At best, we stand and sing and worship as we follow the music leader. Then, we sit and listen as we learn from the preacher.

For us, the worship service consists of seeing and worshipping God, and is led by your leaders, pastors, and elders as your shepherds. What we sing, how we pray, what we confess, the reading and preaching of God's Word, and the celebration of the sacraments are related to one another each and every week. They play off each other; there are statements and responses, questions and answers, pleas and sentiments of gratitude—all a part of the entire service.

Let me suggest that if you are currently seeking a church home, or you find yourself in the future seeking a church home, you evaluate the church you are visiting on the entire worship service, not simply one aspect of it. Is the worship service telling a story? Does it have a beginning, middle and end? Does it seem to be of one piece?

Now, of course, your musical preferences and the giftedness of the preacher will play some role. They should. But it should be a secondary role to the entire service itself.

The corporate worship service is and must be about worshipping, serving, proclaiming, confessing and hearing from the Triune God. We do a disservice to God and His people if this church is built around any one aspect of our worship service, or any one person. This church ought to be known for her commitment to make much of God every single Lord's Day during every aspect of worship service.

The church should never be about the preacher, the music program, the choir, or anything else. Our corporate worship should always be about how every aspect of what we do here together relentlessly points God's people, you and me, to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, in this sense, the sermon cannot be the most important part of our worship service, but a very important part of the whole.

## **B. Preaching is not teaching.**

To say it positively, preaching is proclamation. Preaching, when done faithfully and with integrity, is setting God before you. It is ultimately a call to action, in some way.

If the preaching part of our service was teaching, then everything done beforehand would simply be an introduction to the meat of our service, in which we learn more about God.

The function of teaching is to impart information—to instruct those who are gathered to learn. Do you see how even the language shifts the center of gravity of our entire time together? If preaching is primarily teaching, then during our sermons, you are learning. We've changed a service of worship to a time of instruction. The chapel has become a classroom.

So, these are the two things preaching is not supposed to be in our corporate worship service. It is not supposed to be the most important part or the only reason you come. And the reading and preaching in corporate worship is not a time of teaching, in the literal sense of that word.

Keeping these two in mind, we protect ourselves from making the corporate worship service sermon-centric or preacher-centric but instead keep our entire service Theo-centric, or God-centric.

## **II. Preaching is...**

Now, let's consider what preaching is. If it isn't teaching but instead proclamation, what does that mean?

I like to say, and 2 Timothy is explicit too, that preaching is one means God uses to change His people, to grow them and shape them.

Preaching is divine communication. You are not students learning from my teaching, but together we are saved sinners being led by God's Word to the Triune God Himself.

Mike Glodo says a preacher is an ambassador, a herald of the kingdom of God announcing a state of affairs for the purpose of persuading God's people and God's enemies and eliciting faith in the good news. He goes on to say that the preacher preaches as an oracle of God, the very voice of the good Shepherd whose sheep hear His voice.

There is something profoundly supernatural that happens during our worship service, and in particular at this part of the worship service. God speaks to all of us, me included, from His Word if and when we submit together under this Word as it is read and preached. It is here where the Holy Spirit reproves, corrects, trains, and equips us for good work.

It isn't simply a transfer of data—fact points delivered to you so you know more about the Bible. God reveals more of Himself so that we can see His world and ourselves as they truly are, all for the purpose of doing the good work God has called us to do.

It is only the Holy Spirit that knows my heart and knows your heart. It is only the Holy Spirit that can take God's Word and apply It in order to equip you for the good work God has prepared in advance for you to do. Do you need to be corrected or reprov'd, admonished and called out? God the Spirit will convict you in order to produce in you a harvest of good work.

Are you listing a bit in your Christian walk, or starting to stall in terms of growth, fervor, and enthusiasm? God the Spirit will take the Word of God and teach you as you mature in Jesus so that you will grow in righteousness. This is how the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* recasts 2 Timothy 3:

Q: How is the Word made effectual to salvation?

A: The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word and effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.<sup>9</sup>

Preaching is an effectual means of making holiness in God's people. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* asks the same question, but gives a "larger" answer than the Shorter Catechism. It's helpful for us to read it though.

Q. How is the word made effectual to salvation?

A. The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.<sup>10</sup>

Now that is worth memorizing. The Holy Spirit is the acting agent in the act of preaching. He uses what happens here and now to convince and humble us, driving us out of ourselves and drawing us to Christ, conforming us to His image. It strengthens us against temptation and corruption, building us up in grace and establishing our hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.

This is crucially important for me, your pastor, to keep in mind. I have to remember that this is the work of the Holy Spirit when I have the privilege of proclaiming God's Word to you. This is not my time to be up here speaking, but it is the Spirit's time to work on you through this means of grace.

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<sup>9</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, 89

<sup>10</sup> Westminster Large Catechism

There is another practical application of all of this for me, as we view the reading and preaching of God's Word on Sunday morning. Writing a sermon takes time. It is hard work. I am committed to pursuing faithfulness to God's Word when I preach. But the minute I begin to see preaching as my primary role in your life, or the most important part of my ministry in your life, then I've bought into the lie that this time is about me.

If I am going to be a faithful minister in your lives, I will need to study, write, and pray through the sermon every week. But I better not do that to the neglect of pastoring and shepherding you. God uses our time together to make this ministry effective, whether I am praying for or with you, providing pastoral counsel when you ask for it, or seeking ways to encourage you always and admonish you when necessary. I must work hard to know God's Word so that I might faithfully preach it and that the Spirit might effectively use it in your life. But I also must work hard and be committed to knowing you, being in your lives, along with all of your elders. The Spirit uses the Monday-Saturday ministry, too.

My time with you is used by the Spirit to strengthen preaching as a means of grace for you. God works grace in the lives of His people using various means. The pastoral ministry provided by your elders is a crucial way.

So we proclaim, not teach, at this point in our Worship Service. But what is it that we proclaim? It might be obvious, but it is God's Word. In this church, we allow the Scriptures to dictate what the subject of the sermon will be. It is referred to as expository preaching because we exposit God's Word. Since we began as a church, we have preached all, or a portion of, 32 books of the Bible.

In 2012, your session asked me for a tentative schedule of what books of the Bible we would submit ourselves to in the next 10 years. That was several years ago, and here is what we tentatively had planned: 1 & 2 Peter, Ecclesiastes, Romans, Various Psalms, Acts, Ezra/Nehemiah, Philemon/Jude, Leviticus, James, and 1 & 2 Thessalonians. That will take us to through the year 2022.

I bring this up because I want you to know what preaching is in our corporate worship service. It is digging into the Word of God to see God and His work. It is not thematic or topically driven. Preaching in this church will always be proclaiming God's Word, systematically and informatively.

When a church makes its worship service about something or someone other than God, the church becomes ill.

When a church makes the reading and preaching of God's Word optional, that church will begin to die.

When a church believes God's Word is one of many fallible sources from which we can learn, that church is dead.

However, if you find a church that is committed to preaching the inerrant, infallible and authoritative Word and worshipping the Triune God of that Word, then that church will endure. This is not because of the preacher or the leadership, or any of the programs, but because of the Father, Son and Spirit they are always pointing to.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).

## ***Worship Matters:***

By the Reverend Davis W. Morgan

*This is the sixth sermon in GCPC's Worship Matters series, in which we discuss our corporate worship service and why we worship the way we do.*

One of the greatest vacations my wife and I ever took was to Europe in the fall of 2010. We spent two weeks in Rome, Athens, cruising the Mediterranean, and visiting the sinking city of Italy, Venice.

Now with all of the sights we saw – the Coliseum, the Vatican, the Parthenon, Mars Hill, ancient Ephesus, Santorini – one might expect that the sights might be *the* memory of the trip. But if you were to ask my wife and I what we remember the most about that trip is the food we ate.

There was one meal in particular that we always talk about which took place in Rome. It was in the *Piazza Na-vona* at about 7:30 at night. The sky was clear. You could see the fading silhouette of the stars rising about the city lights.

We could hear the sound of the fountain of four rivers that was about 75 yards away from where we were sitting, where we were enjoying the most delicious Italian food we had ever eaten. I had a plate of lasagna that literally melted in your mouth. My wife had a plate of gnocchi that still to this day, she always compares to whatever packaged kind she buys here.

That was a *great* meal. It had all the ingredients that make a meal memorable: the setting, the mood, the food, and the fellowship. Indeed, there is something sacred about sitting down and sharing a hand-prepared meal with family, friends, even complete strangers that can take us to another place and we can – even though it is for a moment – be lifted out of whatever stresses and problems we may be dealing with and feel the longing for our fellowship to never end.

The longing for eternal bliss and fellowship – to enjoy heaven on earth – is written into hearts by God Himself.

This longing is what the divine service is about. This service if you will is like a fine Italian meal that has been prepared specifically to lift us out of the struggles and anxieties of this life and take us into the heavenly presence of our covenant God and King.

It is here that God meets us in mercy and grace, ready to serve us through the ministry of His Word to which every element of our liturgy is connected.

We do not emphasize one element over another, for they all have their origin in the Father's revelation of the Son by the Spirit which we read, and sing, and pray, and hear, and now this morning, **we see in the sacraments of baptism and communion.**

The sacraments are the visible Word, pointing to God's work in redemptive history, where He reveals Himself and dwells among His people.

- It began with Adam and Eve, with the Tree of Life as **the visible word** in their midst before they fell and afterwards, the animal skins God clothed them with – reminding them of His promise to deliver them.



- With Noah it was the rainbow as the visible Word, God attaching His promise to never again flood the earth and giving mankind a visible sign of His infinite mercy and in doing so, to reaffirm His promise to send a Redeemer
- With Abraham it was circumcision, God giving it to him as a “sign & seal” of the faith God had reckoned to him as righteousness.
- And in Genesis 17, He was to give the sign to all of his male descendants passing down the promise from generation to generation, always designed to cultivate faith in the hearts of God’s people who are to continually look to Him and believing that He would do what He said He would do.
- Then we come to the greatest event in redemptive history in the OT: the book of Exodus.

And as we read earlier in 1 Cor. 10, that event was written down for our instruction as the new covenant Israel (the people of God), specifically how they responded to God’s presence among them, and His provision for them.

Notice especially how Paul describes their covenant experience:

**For they were all** (men, women, and children) **baptized** into Moses (their covenant Mediator), the cloud (the presence of God/the Holy Spirit), and through the Red Sea (the waters of their redemption)...

And **they all ate** the same spiritual food and **drank** the same spiritual drink that flowed from the Rock, and the Rock that followed them was Christ Himself.

So you can already see the parallels Paul is drawing here, can’t you?

- *“Listen up church, learn from covenant history. Remember our spiritual forefathers? They too were baptized. They too ate and drank in the presence of God. They were provided everything they needed as they traveled in the wilderness by Christ Himself and yet...*

With most of them God was not pleased and He judged them for their unbelieving, immoral, idolatrous hearts. We too are faced with similar temptations are we not?

- The temptation to succumb to, to tolerate a little sexual immorality in our lives.
- The temptation to worship other gods and masters, really not giving God the time of day Sunday afternoon through the following Sunday morning...
- The temptation to complain and question God’s goodness toward us: having a critical spirit rather than a grateful heart.
- And the temptation to become spiritually lethargic – allowing our hearts to become hardened to spiritual truth and beauty.

These examples were written down so that we would understand the stakes are high when we dabble in sin thinking, “It won’t affect me. It won’t affect my relationship with Christ. I got this handled. It’s under control.”

*Don't be deceived, learn from covenant history so you are not doomed to repeat their failures.*

Paul then comforts his audience in verse 13 that these temptations are merely human in comparison to what God has done and provided for His people.<sup>11</sup> They come from within whereas what God has done comes to us from the outside, drawing us away from ourselves to the one who alone can provide deliverance – vs. 13:

- “God is faithful and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

What's he talking about? I can't tell you how many times I've heard pastors quote this first out of context and come up with their own ways of how God is faithful, completely ignoring the redemptive historical context of the passage. **God IS faithful! Look at what He provided His old covenant people: baptism (deliverance), food, drink, CHRIST (the presence of God with them)**

**What has He provided for you new covenant people??? Baptism, food, drink, Christ as your Mediator!**

In the previous examples, those who complained were rejecting the very means of survival and salvation that God offered.<sup>12</sup> They ignored the means of grace He provided them and as a result they were overtaken by their own lusts and unbelieving hearts.

Therefore, he says, **flee from idolatry**. Avoid like the plague those things, which are going to entice you to neglect and ultimately, reject God's means of grace *for you*.

And listen, this is a very real warning for us here this morning. Because if there's one thing we see in this passage when it comes to how we respond to God's appointed means of grace, it's that they were inwardly led astray first, that later led to them being outwardly led astray.

*Where are you this morning? Are you drifting from God who provides? Are you distracted? Are you tired? Are you coasting? Here but not really here? You may be here today but then gone for the next two/three weeks because it's really not important to you, this divine appointment...*

*Maybe you're not here literally and you are listening to this sermon from your home thinking, "why do I need to be there every week? It's way more practical to sleep in and listen to the sermon later in the week when I'm working or driving in the car or doing what I want to do..."*

*Watch out. Watch out. The battle starts right here and then speaks with your feet – what you do with what you hear in this service and what you do when no one else is around.*

For the Israelites, it was their flesh, the discontentment of their hearts, their perception of their circumstances, their physical needs, that led them to reject what God had provided.

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<sup>11</sup> Pheme Perkins, *First Corinthians: Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament*, 125.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

They thought they deserved more. Everything that God had done wasn't enough. They were hungry. They were thirsty. They were restless and tired of waiting for Him to do what they felt they could do and so they engaged in immorality and idolatry fully knowing that God would be displeased and here's the frightening thing – they didn't care.

They wanted their appetites satisfied. They wanted their pleasure more than they wanted God's provision. They wanted the lusts and desires NOW.

We want our appetites satisfied! We want our pleasure, our lusts, our desires NOW! We neglect our gracious Master's provision and so HEAR what Your covenant God is saying:

- The sin that you are battling, the temptation comes from within – you must understand that, you must know that it is because “your passions are at war within you.” You desire and do not have and so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people!

We have to understand this in order to fully understand the function of the sacraments in our lives, publicly and especially privately where we called to improve on them by applying them. Theologian John Fesko writes in his book on the sacraments:

- “As Israel was baptized and fed spiritually and then judged for idolatry, those who are baptized into Christ must learn from this type and be careful not to fall into idolatry and judgment.”<sup>13</sup>

That's where Paul takes us by reminding us of the significance the bread and wine, and by implication, the water in our baptism.

- The bread that we break, is it not *participation* in the body of Christ?
- The cup that we drink, is it not *participation* in the blood of Christ?
- The water that we are baptized with, it is not a *participation* in the death and resurrection of Christ?<sup>14</sup>

These are not mere rituals that we practice. They are *the very means* that God has provided to nourish and sustain us as we travel through the wilderness of this world on to the City of God.

Now that we have unpacked the redemptive historical background, I want to spend our remaining time addressing the public ministry of the sacraments and their private ministry as well.

### **The Public Ministry of Baptism & the Supper**

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<sup>13</sup> J.V. Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit*, 320.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 6:1-4

Like preaching, the sacraments are objective means of grace. That is, their veracity and effectiveness does not depend on the one administering them but on God who attaches His promises to them and the Holy Spirit who confirms them in the hearts of His people.

They are completely outside of us, which are why they, like preaching, are unique in this regard. They are God addressing His people in mercy and in grace and that *only takes place here, in the context of worship.*

The sacraments, like every other aspect of our liturgy, are tied to the ministry of the Word *but are unique in that they ratify what we hear.*

This is why, when we have a baptism, one of our elders will take us to the font with a short homily on the theology of baptism. With communion, we receive the bread and the wine *after* the audible proclamation of God's Word and the words of institution since it is confirming to us as believers what we have heard we now see God giving tangibly to us.

*And what is He giving to us?* This is key to understanding what a sacrament is → what we mean when we say “means of grace?”

It is crucial to remember what grace is. Grace is not something impersonal that has no face to it that Christians use to describe God's love or forgiveness. *No, grace is tied for a person. “From His fullness we have all received grace upon grace.”*

God's grace is the revelation and person of His Son – It is the Lord Jesus! Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are united with Christ and receive grace upon grace!<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the sacraments are given by God to proclaim, strengthen, remind, and to GIVE us nothing short of **Jesus Christ Himself by faith!**

We were dead, God made us alive through Christ. This is what we mean when we say the sacraments are “means of grace.”

They are God physically telling us: “I have done everything for your salvation, believe it! By grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone!”

Baptism serves as the sign of initiation into visible church, the covenant community of God on earth.

- The Lord's Supper serves as the sign and seal of covenant ratification, as seen on the night before He was to give His life as ransom, Jesus said that His blood was the blood of the new covenant, thereby confirming everything He did as our representative, would be ours by looking to Him and trusting in Him alone for our righteousness before God.

- In baptism, we are passive recipients, whether child or adult, as it is the Triune God who claims us and places us in His visible covenant community. Thus, baptism has a corporate dimension – we are baptized individually but that baptism is part of a larger corporate baptism. We saw this in our passage: Israel was corporately saved in the Red Sea baptism as a nation, which included households of men, women, and children.

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<sup>15</sup> Fesko, 273.

- This is why we still practice household baptisms here at Grace. We believe this corporate, covenantal dimension is still the same as it was with Israel at the Red Sea and the household baptisms we see in the book of Acts.

- Nevertheless, like the nation of Israel who was baptized, our household and we are called to believe what our baptism signifies: our union with Christ in His death and resurrection. For a baptism of fire fell upon Jesus on the cross, the wrath and condemnation of God for our sin so that we could be baptized with the Holy Spirit and receive eternal life.

- So every time we witness a baptism, we who have been baptized should be looking to the Lord Jesus, praising Him for undergoing the baptism of judgment for us and for giving us the sacrament of baptism to remind us of our union with Him and that nothing can separate us from Him.

In the Supper, we are active participants, invited to eat and drink with our covenant Lord. This sacrament is different from baptism in that it is strictly for those who look to the one who borne their condemnation and are demonstrating that they *need* what is offered at the Table.

As we read earlier, we fellowship with Him, we participate in His body and His blood for through His death, we have communion with Him at this table where we are assured of the Father's love for us as His beloved children, He has prepared this table of physical elements to feed us spiritually and say to us,

- *One day...we will eat together face to face. All your longings for relationship and significance, right here I remind you that it is coming beyond what you can possibly imagine. The joy you experience when you sit with your wife in Rome under the stars eating fine Italian food, or the joy you experience when you come to this table is but a morsel of the meal and fellowship you will enjoy with me in the banquet I am preparing for you.*

This is why we practice weekly communion. We want God's means of grace every week! We want to experience His presence and comfort and grow in our trust and longing for Him every week!

You'll notice too that when you come, you are served by our elders and pastors – those men who we believe God has called to shepherd you and your family as a ministry of the Lord Jesus, the Chief Shepherd. They too are served by one another, confessing their dependence on Jesus serving them.

And they don't just hold out the bread and cup for you to take and be on your way, no they speak words of comfort and promise and exhortation, reminding you that you are forgiven in Christ and are part of the work of new creation He is bringing into the world. Thus, we do not fix our eyes on the things of this world, but we look and long and pray for the age to come!

This is what the Supper proclaims – death, resurrection, new creation! And that Jesus is actively present with us here, every week. By faith we receive Him, His benefits, and communion.

Baptism reminds us that we are part of the great legacy of covenant history, and that we corporately are traveling through the wilderness of this life to the promise land of new creation.

And that the great work of redemption has been accomplished by our covenant head, the Lord Jesus. Therefore, we look to Him and His provision of word & sacrament as He has established here every time we gather.

**The Private Ministry of the Sacraments:**

And that is so when we go from here and the temptations come, the first thing we think about is “I am baptized with Christ: which means that everything that happened to Him – His death and resurrection, His obedience, His Spirit-filled life – is mine by faith. I am no longer live, but Christ lives in me. Therefore, I can resist this temptation as He did. I can respond in love when I am wronged, or when I feel hurt or betrayed. I can respond in faith, trusting that my heavenly Father is working everything together for my good because HE LOVES ME. He not only tells me that but He has shown me in my baptism and every week right here.

In the Supper He reminds me that though my sin is great, His grace in Jesus is much greater. And that grace is designed to penetrate my heart and fill my mind so that when the heat comes and I am tempted to respond negatively or critically, I can respond instead with grace as He has shown me.

Your Father has spread this table for you, beloved Christian, battered and bruised though you may be from this past week, He calls you to come and eat with Him, come and taste His goodness to you dear sinner.

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – amen.

## *Worship Matters: The Good Work of Giving*

By the Reverend Kyle Oliphint

*This is the seventh sermon in GCPC's Worship Matters series, in which we discuss our corporate worship service and why we worship the way we do.*

A few of us were watching the Tom Hanks movie *Castaway* one night. I made the movie-watching experience a bit less enjoyable by narrating through parts of it, pointing out that there are absolutely no wasted shots in that film. Every prop, every angle, and every line communicates something about the overall story. My narration was not the least bit appreciated.

We want our Sunday mornings week in and week out to be like *Castaway*: no wasted movement or action, and no rote activities or time-fillers. Our liturgy is chock-full of intentional parts that tell an overall story; the Triune God who saved us deserves all of who we are.

In this sermon, we will take a look at the opportunity we have each week to respond to God through our giving. Why do we place the offering at the end of the service? Why is putting money in the plate an act of worship? We want to answer these questions and others. There will be three key words that will guide us in thinking about the offertory in our corporate worship service: **Reflection, Response and Repentance.**

### **I. Reflection**

In Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, he zeroes in on the privilege of giving in chapters 8 and 9. And in Corinthians 9:6 and afterward, Paul sees their giving as a reflection of how generous God has been to them.

One of the primary reasons we have our offering at the end of our service is because we've had over an hour to sing, pray, and reflect on God's goodness to us. From the singing of the doxology to our prayers of invocation and adoration, our entire service is a loud and busy reflection of the Triune God's active and sustaining grace in our lives.

As we open God's Word and listen to it being read and preached, God speaks to us. And this is when the Holy Spirit takes the driver's seat in our reflections. Only He ultimately knows what you are to reflect on as we sit together under the preached Word. Only He has orchestrated the details of your life so that you would be perfectly suited to hear what God has to say to you today. The Holy Spirit's work is very intimate, individual, and tailored for you. Therefore, the reflection here will always be Spirit-driven, deeply personal, and deeply theological. The same should be true of your giving, even now as the Spirit works in you. Giving is always Spirit-driven, deeply personal, and deeply theological.

The other aspect of our liturgy that explicitly calls us to reflection is our celebration of the sacraments. The font calls us to remember the gracious work of the Trinity and the Trinity alone in our salvation. Baptism drags us back to God's covenant with us, and reminds us of the lengths He went to keep this covenant and our privilege to live in covenant with Him.

Jesus Himself tells us to remember, remember, remember Him every time we come to the table to celebrate the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper confronts us every week with our impotence, our utter inability to save ourselves.

In remembering and reflecting on the sacraments, we should be stripped of any vestige of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency, throwing us grateful but saved sinners on the mercy and grace of God. Paul underscores this point, the utterly helpless made sufficient by God, in verse 8.

We follow our entire liturgy, all of this reflecting and remembering, by responding as an act of worship in the offering.

## **II. Response**

Our response is a tangible response from God's people. Again, this is Paul's plea to the people of Corinth in verses 6 and afterward. Given all that this gracious God has showered upon us, given that any sufficiency at all is evidence of the gift that He has given to us, we will give a reflexive, cheerful response. We will truly know who God is and what God has done in and for us. Reluctant, compulsory, or forced giving will not be part of the equation.

Paul's point here is if the giving on the part of the Corinthians is forced or reluctant, they've lost the truth of God and the gospel. To put it positively, once we realize how God has worked through time to secure us for Himself forever, the only real response is to give enthusiastically and readily, verse 2.

I was once a big fan of David Letterman, and remember when he had heart surgery back in 2000. When he returned to his show after a month of recuperation, he devoted the first part of the show to the doctors and nurses who cared for him. With extreme and endearing gratitude, he brought the medical staff out on stage, said something about each of the doctors and nurses, and then went over to hug each one of them. Now, if you are familiar with stoic, acerbic, and sarcastic David Letterman, this was more than out of the ordinary. He was so grateful for the work of the doctors and nurses, who he credited with saving his life, that he responded by giving them the national spotlight and thanking them in front of millions of people.

When we realize that we've been saved, the natural and cheerful response is always to give back generously. As we reflect during our entire service on all that God has done, how much more should our response be than over-the-top gratitude in giving?

Let me say three brief things about how our reflection calls forth this response and what that might mean for you and me. Our response as givers is tactical, (not a) token gesture, and an act of trust.

### **Tactical**

First, as we just mentioned, the offering is tactically placed so that our response is, with wide open hearts and wallets, to the God we've seen and worshipped. The offering is a call to action.



Look at what you've sung, prayed, confessed, professed, heard, and tasted about your Triune God. Now, what are you going to do about it? That is why the offering is where it is in our Corporate Worship service; it is an opportunity to respond to Him. It is tactical.

Like *Castaway*, there is no wasted movement in our service of corporate worship. So, the offering is purposely placed where it is so you can respond generously to the God who has been eternally generous to you.

But for this to be a tangible sign of your worship, you ought to be placing something in the plate. If you let the plate pass you without putting anything in there, you are robbing yourself of an activity of worship. It would be like just standing during the singing of a hymn. As you stand with your mouth closed, you are not worshipping. To worship in song with the body of Christ you must be singing with the body of Christ.

The same is true as we give. Physically placing something, even coins or a dollar or two, in the plate as it passes you is an expressed activity of worship where you are saying, "This is yours. All I have and all I am is from you. This is my testimony to this wonderful truth, my response to all of the wonderful truths we've sung, prayed, heard and tasted of You this morning."

We've had opportunities as a church to make available an online giving option. When we were building our new website, there was an option to allow giving through the website. We didn't do that and we won't do that because we think the act of placing your money in the plate is an important, tangible, and active part of your worship. Again, at the risk of taking the analogy too far, if everyone in this church gave online, that would be akin to piping in music for us to simply listen to, instead of singing hymns. It would rob us of the act of worshipping in song. Online giving can rob you of the act of worshipping in response to what you've taken a part of on Sunday mornings.

Now there may be some of you who give to this church through your bank. You may have it set up to where your bank sends the treasurer a check on a predetermined date and frequency. I understand the appeal of this, especially for those of us who are growing more and more forgetful. It is done and we don't have to think about it. But it is just this, the not thinking about it, that is depriving you of this aspect of worship. If this is you, may I encourage to do something? Even if you want to keep the automatic withdrawals in place, for your sake would you consider also participating in this part of our worship service, actively worshipping by placing money in the plate each week? I am not asking you to do this so we can bring in more money. I am asking you to consider doing this so you will be able to participate in a crucial part of the worship service. You will actually reflect on and respond in a very tangible way to what God has done for you so that you can actively worship and respond to Him in each and every worship service.

**(Not a) Token**

Our response to God and what He has done is not supposed to be a token or a tip. Three times in 2 Corinthians 9 Paul addresses the idea of generous giving in verses 9-11. Using God as a model of free and generous giving, Paul says we too are to give freely and generously, and that our harvest of righteousness will increase.

This is Paul's point: giving is a sanctifying activity as we respond to God's grace to us. It is here (and other places in the New Testament) where we see the Old Testament idea of "tithing," or giving 10%, transform into the uber-abundance and riches of the Triune God's presence and His active work in this new age.

There are no longer guidelines to giving (no minimum or maximum) set for God's people. Setting the people's generosity in the context of God's generosity to us, Paul creates for the Corinthians a whole new and limitless model for generous giving. Set your giving response to God's work in your life in light of God's giving to you.

Paul radically changed the equation for God's people. As a matter of law in the Old Testament, God's people were to bring their first fruits and their tithes for the ongoing work of ministry in the Nation of Israel. Now that all of God's promises have found their embodiment in the person and work of Jesus, and ministry is headed up by His indwelling Spirit, grace abounds and His people will be enriched in every way. This produces grateful hearts, as His people seek to outdo one another in their generosity.

The point is that the New Testament ethic on giving is always and everywhere on the side of generosity and abundance. It is always a heart-enlightened response to what God has done for them. Our giving is really a gospel issue. We give generously in response to God's limitless grace to us.

## **Trusting**

So you give and you give generously as an act of worship. What then? The last "T" under this response is the word "trust." When you give, you do so trusting God and those men He has placed in leadership of your church. The way the Presbyterian form of government works is the people you have elected and we've ordained as elders set the budget of the year. Your elders determine what money goes where and why. So when you give, you are living out the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> membership vows, which all members have taken. You are trusting and submitting to your leadership and the decisions they've made about where the money goes and why.

Your deacons, ordained leaders given to us by God, are then charged with disbursing these funds and encouraging a spirit of liberality among God's people that they serve. So, as you give generously as a response to all God has given you, we ask that you trust the leaders God has provided to you as shepherds and servants. These men are charged with the stewardship of the funds you have given.

Now this isn't a blind trust. Every member of this church at any time and for any reason may ask for and receive the complete budget for any given year. In our state-of-the-congregation meeting each February, our Treasurer and the Deacons simply give you a high-flyover of our

past year and what we are planning for the new year. But please know that a specific, line-by-line budget is available for your review at any time.

We all believe that this is God's money. That is the heart of the offering, and you should know how and why His money is being spent the way it is.

So after we've reflected on who God is for our entire service, we respond here tactically at the end of the service, not with a token gift but many, and we do so trusting those God has set to manage the funds you give.

### **III. Repentance**

Finally, think of this part of our worship service as an ongoing act of repentance. We know, I hope, that repentance is not a one-act endeavor but instead a way of life, a walk. The first stage of repentance is always a turning from the world to God, and it is an ongoing motion. It isn't simply a turn and stop, but a turn followed by steps—a movement toward God.

During the offering, when you put your money in the plate, it is an act of you stepping away from self-sufficient independence toward a Christ-sufficient dependence. This also reminds us that our giving is to God. Ultimately, you're not giving to this church, but to God. This church, of course, benefits from your generosity, but just as your repentance from anything will be to the benefit of those in your life, it is always repentance to God.

After you've been reminded of Who your Triune God is and all that the Trinity has done to secure you for Himself forever, the step of repentance in our worship service is found in the offering. It loosens your grip on His material blessings and generously returns them to Him, trusting Him for the grateful heart that will follow such generosity.

Repentance is always hard. By definition, it is letting go of something we've held on to tightly, something we've trusted or loved or worshipped more than God Himself. Repentance liberates us from a doomed security so that we can place ourselves in the secure and forever work of God Himself. So giving should be hard. It should hurt a little bit. It is a sacrifice on our part in response to the sacrifice of Jesus for us.

You might want to think of this act of your worship as a recommitment to trusting Him with all things He has given you, and these funds are simply a symbol of that trust in this act of repentance. The offering in worship is a place where you tangibly and intentionally move toward God as you give up a portion of what He has blessed you with in the first place.

Finally, as an act of worship, your gifts are purposely brought forward and placed here on the pulpit by one of your deacons. They are living out their call to serve you in encouraging generous liberality in your giving as you are living out your call to respond to God in your giving. You see, there is no wasted movement. He has given us everything and He deserves everything from us. Because we believe that, may we seek to outdo one another in our generosity.

## ***Worship Matters: The Bestowal of Peace***

By Kyle Oliphint, *Senior Minister*

*This is the eighth sermon in Grace Community Presbyterian Church's Worship Matters series, in which we discuss our corporate worship service and why we worship the way we do. This series was preached at GCPC in Fort Worth, Texas, in the spring and summer of 2015. The sermons are available on our website at [www.gcpcfw.org](http://www.gcpcfw.org).*

In Luke 24, nothing goes as expected. At every turn, there is a new surprise or challenge. And once it seems the confusion is starting to clear, something else happens that fogs everything up again. Let's briefly go through what happens in Luke 24 because it is important in understanding parts of our corporate worship.

Just days after their leader was executed and buried, the disciples learn that He has come back to life. But they can't take it all in, and Jesus calls them foolish in verse 25. He confirms that everything has happened as it should, and reminds them that suffering precedes glory. He points out that the Scriptures tell His story, and He can help them understand it.

They understood that this One knew Truth and helped them make sense of it all, so they wanted to hang on to Him. In verse 29, they ask Him not to leave because it is nighttime. And so He stays; they sit and break bread. The Teacher serves it.

It is now that they see Who He is. He isn't simply One with profound insight into Scripture, and He isn't the One who would enable them to make sense of all that had happened. He is THE One, the Resurrected Savior. He's back! He's here! And then He isn't. He disappears from their sight.

And there they are, recounting how their hearts burned within them as He taught them. Who was He, they wonder. They saw Who He was; they saw Jesus as He blessed the bread, broke it and gave it to them. He is alive! He is risen, and they rejoice.

As they say it, He appears again in the room with a blessing of peace. Then there are doubts again, manifested in fear. Who is this, they wonder. How soon they forget. How soon we forget...

It's Him, in the flesh, in His new and resurrected body. The patience of Jesus is supernatural, as he shepherds His forgetful, doubting sheep, and provides love. He tells them to touch Him. He is here, body and soul.

I love the way the English captures this moment: "...disbelieved for joy..." (verse 4). It is too good to be true! They thought they lost Him, and He's back, in the flesh. They can't take it all in.

"Have you anything to eat?" It's a question born out of the compassion Jesus has for those He loves. How they treasured the last meal they had with Him before His arrest. But that last supper is not the last supper they have with Him, so again they eat. If there were any doubts about the living Savior before them now, they should dissipate here.

Now they know who He is. Earlier, He taught and then revealed Himself. Here, He reveals Himself, goes to great pains to help their unbelief, allows them to touch Him and eat with Him, and then shows them how He has fulfilled all of the Scriptures.

In verses 44-51, Jesus takes center-stage. We have no idea how the disciples are responding and reacting. It is simply Jesus doing two things: teaching and sending. He tells them Who He is, and what He has done. He asks them to tell everyone what they know, and what they've witnessed after they receive and are sealed with the promise of His Father in Heaven. Jesus gives them clues to the day of Pentecost when His Spirit will be sent so that they may witness to Him with power.

And then off to Bethany they go. With all of this as a backdrop, with the heavy front-end loading of the last few hours, Jesus raises His hands, blesses them, and ascends to the right hand of His Father.

Now, with doubts obliterated, Scriptures made clear, and questions answered, all they do is worship with great joy. This is their response.

I want to submit to you that, with obvious qualifications, Luke 24 has many connecting points for us as we gather and worship corporately every week.

Like those in Jesus' day, we struggle with confusion, doubt, and battles. Expectations go unmet, and unfortunate surprises knock us down a notch. Things aren't what we wish they would be, and just when we find ourselves in a place that seems right, it all changes again. Our faith is battered and challenged. Our eyes grow dim with the things of this world, and the monotony of the day-to-day weighs us down. If we're not careful, we can form a pessimistic, hyper-critical perspective.

There is a huge continuum of experiences and all of us can find our place somewhere on it each day. What have you brought here with you today? Confusion and doubt? Spiritual weariness or apathy? Broken or breaking relationships? Maybe you're a slave to secret sin. Hear this: Jesus is here and He brings peace.

In this sermon, we will take a look at the final element of our corporate worship service: the Benediction. We see the greatest Benediction of all time in verses 50-51 of Luke 24. There we see Jesus leading His disciples out to Bethany, lifting His hands and blessing them. Verse 51 keeps our focus on Jesus as Luke tells us that the blessing Jesus gives continues as He ascends up into heaven.

We will think about the nature of the Benediction, the posture we take in the Benediction, and finally, the purpose of it.

## **I. The Nature**

“Benediction” means blessing. It is made up of two Latin words, *bene* and *dicere*, that together mean, “to speak well of.” This definition, perhaps, captures best the nature of the blessing; it is a reminder of the promises of God for you in Christ. The Benediction scoops up all the truths of your identity in Jesus, many of which you've sung and heard and professed, and

then lays them on you, covering God's new Covenant community. To summarize the Benediction, it is God speaking well of you, His people, whom He finds in Jesus.

Nothing made me happier as a boy than to hear my dad say "atta-boy." It was usually in the context of some sport, often baseball. He worked hard with me, coaching me formally on three different teams and informally in the backyard. He helped with the pitchback as I threw, with the pole that held the ball as I practiced my swing, and in long sessions of playing catch. He helped when I hit grounders, fly balls, fast balls, and everything else. Dad was a very good baseball player when he was younger, even having a shot in the minors until a shoulder injury. I was his only son that stuck with baseball through high school, and he wanted me to succeed. Even when I thought I made a great catch, or hit a solid ball, if I didn't hear "atta-boy," I knew I did something wrong. Maybe my form was bad or my throw after the catch was off, but something had to be wrong. So hearing an "atta-boy" from him was high praise; it meant I learned something He taught me and I executed it well.

I tell you this because the Benediction is so much more than the Father stating that you've performed well. It is the Father saying again, while pointing to Jesus, "this is My Son, in Whom I'm well-pleased." He then directs His gaze to us and says, "And you are in Him, possessing all that is His." We then have received the power from on high, the Spirit of the Risen Christ, the One we've worshipped throughout the morning.

The Benediction is not just a blessing, but a stamp of ownership. It is the Triune God saying, "I chose you from before the foundations of the world. I lived, suffered, died, rose again, ascended and now reign over you for your good and the glory of the Father, and I now inhabit you, live within you, indwell you with the very power of the resurrection."

If my dad had been able to go back in time and design his fourth-born son, he would have made sure I had all the DNA required to give me the strength, power, coordination and skill of Roberto Clemente, one of his favorite ball players. He would have devoted his whole life to making me a major-league player, something he always wanted for himself. He would have indwelt me and given me everything necessary to flourish. But all he could do was practice with me. This is not so for God; the Trinity has committed all of Who they are to the people they've chosen, bought and indwelt. This is what we hear in the Benediction. And this is why every Benediction you hear from this place will be God's Word. It is not going to be some general good wishes, but the voice of God from the Word of God for the people of God. It is God addressing His people in His Own words.

Jesus' blessing of His disciples as He ascends marks a close to His earthly ministry, but it also marks the beginning of His disciples' earthly witness. This too is the nature of our Benediction every week. It marks the close of our corporate worship service, but it also marks the beginning of your life lived in Him until next week. So it is both an end and a sendoff, leading God's people out into the world with assurance, blessing and peace. In being sent off, we are reminded in the Benediction of everything God has accomplished and provided for us in Christ. Like the disciples, we are now sent into the world by Jesus Himself to be witnesses to Him in how we live, speak, act, love and serve.

The nature of the benediction is a blessing, a scooping up of the truth and promises of God we've heard and sung about, and a stamp of ownership that both concludes our corporate worship service and marks the sending out of God's people as witnesses to Him. All of it is God Himself speaking words of assurance, promise and expectation as we leave this place and enter into a world hostile to Him.

## **II. The Posture**

What about our posture during the Benediction? The posture of the minister and the posture of the people?

You may or may not notice at the beginning of our worship service, in the Prayer of Adoration or Prayer of Invocation, that the minister will raise his arms with palms facing up. This is the posture of the minister as he offers the prayer on behalf of the people. With the hands facing up, his posture is as the suppliant or the petitioner, the asker or requester. The minister approaches God in prayer for the gathered people, begging His divine presence and enflaming, by His Spirit, the hearts of His people in the room. It is corporate prayer as the minister, with arms raised and hands facing up, represents God's people and all of us offer Him this prayer of petition.

The posture in the Benediction is different. The arms are raised but the palms are faced out while God's Word is read as a blessing to God's people. Here the minister represents God to God's people, signifying the real and genuine blessing of God covering His people.

We have already given ourselves—body, mind and strength—to the corporate worship of Father, Son and Spirit. With arms up and palms turned outward, the Benediction is God reminding you, through His minister, that you are sealed in His sovereign care and love.

What then is to be the posture of the people of God? We practice here at this church to stand and receive it. It is a posture of preparedness; we are ready to receive and go as He blesses and sends us. There is a good bit of discussion as to what else might be a proper posture for those being blessed by God. Some suggest a reverently bowed head, understanding that this may be the posture when they are in the throne room, face-to-face with the God of blessing. Because it is an affirmation from God Himself, there are those who expectantly look up, as the disciples did in Luke 24 when Jesus ascended, joyfully allowing the blessing of God to roll over them. Still others believe the congregation should adopt the posture of the Old Testament saints, raising their hands, palms out, as a sign of receiving the blessing God gives.

The physical posture you adopt at this point in our service is not nearly as important as the posture of your heart.

After meeting with and worshipping the Triune God, and after being enabled to bring Him your worship through the revealing and active work of the Holy Spirit, may your heart be open to this ministry of the Spirit of Christ through God's Word of blessing. May it be expectant, joyfully content, empowered and assured that this blessing is simply a foretaste of sweet and eternal communion with the Godhead in Heaven one day. So raise your hands or not, bow your

heads or look up, but prepare your hearts to receive the assured promises of the God who is blessing you in the Benediction.

### **III. The Purpose**

In one sense, the purpose of the Benediction brings with it the purpose of every element and aspect of our worship service. It is to hold before the people the glorious and Triune God they worship. In this sense, as I've said each and every week, the Benediction holds the same place of importance as every other aspect of our worship service.

But we've also highlighted the differences. As we underlined in the beginning of this series, by the very architecture of this church, we affirm here that the primary ministry of God to His people are in Word and Sacrament.

Our worship is dialogical—we speak to God in prayer and song, using His truth to guide us. But it is when God speaks to us in His Word that all mouths are literally and figuratively shut. The primacy of the preached Word of God, the communication of His truth, is the necessary and vital part of our worship service. Without it, there is no corporate worship. The Sacraments emphasize the Word Spoken as they are now the Word Shown—the audible Word is demonstrated with the Visible Word. The primacy of God's Word read and preached in corporate worship is affirmed and practiced in this church by your ministers and your elders.

The Benediction displays God to you again through the reading of His Word. The purpose is to cover and wrap you up in His promised assurance, and to send you out with the heavenly vibration of peace. The practical purpose of the Benediction is to enable you to face whatever awaits you outside these doors with a pulsating and assured peace.

It is for that reason I always tell you from where in God's Word His blessing comes to you. If you haven't paid attention to the reference before, let me encourage you to do so now and always. Write the reference down and go home and look it up, read it, memorize it, and meditate on it. Make the Benedictions your own, as they are always timely words for us as we face the challenges of living faithfully in a fallen world. They are assurances from God Himself that He is present, that nothing catches Him by surprise, and that He has empowered us through His Spirit for the moments that are dicey, challenging, and seemingly impossible.

When tempers flare, when frustration runs high, when occasional doubts become a deluge, when sadness or despair set in, God's blessing is a soothing balm and encouraging ministry of His Spirit.

For those who are anxious or sad, God's Benediction from Romans 15 blesses us as we are reminded that "He is a God of Hope and has promised to fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in Him, so that we will overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

For all of us who continue to fight and wage vicious war against sin, God's Benediction from Jude 1 reminds us that "He is the One who can keep us from stumbling and He will present us with great joy before the presence of His glory."



These are only two examples of Benedictions, but there are as many Benedictions and blessings that God has given us as there are struggles within the human heart. Listen to them with raised hearts, and receive them from Him because that is Who is blessing you. As we saw and heard in Luke 24, Jesus' purpose is to leave us with His bestowal of peace.

***Worship Matters: Before, During, and After***  
By Kyle Oliphint, *Senior Minister*

*This is the ninth and final sermon in Grace Community Presbyterian Church's Worship Matters series, in which we discuss our corporate worship service and why we worship the way we do. This series was preached at GCPC in Fort Worth, Texas, in the spring and summer of 2015. The sermons are available on our website at [www.gcpcfw.org](http://www.gcpcfw.org).*

In Acts 2, right on the heels of Pentecost when the Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit, He creates and forms a whole new community and culture, designating everyone as new citizens of His Kingdom.

I was born and raised in the state of Texas. I did not have to jump through any hoops, like citizenship exams, to become a citizen of this country. But in a sense, the bureaucratic requirements of the Federal Government are the easiest parts of the process. For those who came from other countries, cultures, and customs—sometimes speaking completely different languages—the citizenship exam is easy compared to the acculturation that we, as citizens, hope they will pursue and embrace. It is the process of finding out what it means to be an American.

Acts 2 shows us the result of 3000+ becoming new Kingdom citizens, not the conversion process. Regarding this passage, the English preacher John Stott wrote, "[God] didn't add them to the church without saving them, and He didn't save them without adding them to the church."<sup>16</sup> It is God *adding them to the church* that we want to think about together this morning.

Verse 42 gives us one of the keys to understanding how this acculturation, this new way of living, begins to take shape. These new believers devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. There was a new and deep unity among them as believers. They had to display, together, who and what they were. There was a particular way to live with and for one another.

They became generous with all they had as they longed to be together daily, practicing hospitality. They would break bread in each other's homes, receive food from one another with glad and generous hearts, praise God, and have favor with all the people. As a result of this kind of Kingdom living, the Lord added to their number day by day. It just keeps growing...and growing.

What we see is a fully immersed, alive, dynamic, and regularly involved Christian community, centered on this devotion to the Word of God being taught. In other words, the new Kingdom culture practiced the earliest of corporate worship services immediately following the Day of Pentecost, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

I briefly want to consider how our corporate worship on Sunday mornings is the means by which God causes this sort of transformation and acculturation for Kingdom citizens. It is

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<sup>16</sup> John Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 32.

through these means that God grows us spiritually, strengthens our unity, and adds more to our number consistently.

What we will consider is intensely and fundamentally practical, but is also rooted in and driven by faith. Faith in God's work and faith in believing who God has made us to be: Kingdom citizens together. This takes intentional, purposeful work on our part. It doesn't just happen; we must seek it out in a disciplined way.

Let's discuss the **Before, During and After**.

## **I. Before**

Upholding everything we consider in this sermon is our foundational identity of being united to Christ and, therefore, being united to one another.

As fellow Kingdom citizens being acculturated to our new Kingdom, although we are separated during the week—in our homes, our work, our schools, and while we are on summer vacation—we are no less united to one another as we are no less united to the Lord Jesus Christ. We do not belong to the kingdom of this world even when we are out living in it. We belong to the Kingdom of God. We are always Kingdom citizens.

We are discussing an endeavor that necessitates faith. Believing not what our eyes see, but what is true of us, in Christ together.

As you receive the Order of Service before we gather physically in our church on Sunday mornings, let me encourage you to remember your brothers and sisters who have also received the Order of Service. Pray for them. Give your own Prayers of Invocation or Adoration.

In your devotionals, consider incorporating the hymns into your time with the Lord. Maybe you will sing them. Maybe you will simply read them out loud. Meditate on them. Consider taking the rich truths in the hymns and writing them out in your own words. Simply recast the words of a hymn as you pray, by faith, that those truths would be grasped by you and by your fellow citizens as we gather here.

As you confess your sin in prayer, remember that your union with Jesus can never be broken, but sin seeks to divide your union with one another. Review your sin and the consequences: who, if anyone, may be affected by your sin? Do you have bitterness towards a brother or sister? Have you taken part in gossip against someone in this body? Do you envy someone in this room and covet what they may have? Confess it to your Savior and seek to mend the ways with the other. This may not require confession to them, but it will require intentional work in your relationship with them.

See your confession of sin as preparation for coming together at this table, celebrating your communion and union with Jesus and with one another. This union is a genuine picture of our Kingdom citizenship.

The key is always thinking corporately, even when, physically, you are alone in your living room with your Bible.

Employ the Words of Comfort and Promise for yourself, your family, and those who sit with you at our service. Perhaps you know a bit more about those you are close to, about particular struggles with assurance or a season of despair they are experiencing. Pray these Words of Comfort and Promise for them, and into them. Call them and tell them, or send them a note. It is difficult to overstate the encouragement we can give to one another when my burdens become your burdens.

Before we gather here, confess out loud the Confession of Faith, believing the long line of fellow Kingdom citizens, past and present, you stand alongside.

The most important preparation for Sunday mornings before we gather is perhaps the reading of God's Word in your homes Monday through Saturday. Before you come here, read and pray through the Scripture passages that will be read on Sunday morning. Spend time slowly reading, studying and praying through the passage that will be preached on, which is always the second passage listed. Pray for your brothers and sisters here that the Holy Spirit will open their hearts and minds, as well as yours, to the truth and application of God's Word.

Consider and pray through what your worship will look like as you bring to God His offering. How much will you give? Is your generosity reflecting your trust in Him? Does your generosity reflect His generosity to you? Pray that God will loosen your hands and the hands of God's people around the things we believe can secure or save us. Pray for generosity and prudence for you and your fellow Kingdom citizens.

Finally, as you prepare before you come here, anticipate the blessing of God that you will receive in the Benediction. It will not be known from where the Benediction will come before Sunday morning, but we can pray for ourselves and one another that our hearts will be fertile and ready to receive it.

## **II. During**

If we as new Kingdom citizens strive for faithfulness in our preparation, then we benefit our hearts by praying our corporate service into them as we gather here.

God has blessed this church in amazing ways. We witness God bringing families from halfway around the world and joining them to this local community gathered here. We are all His Kingdom citizens. God's Kingdom knows no geographical, language, or custom barriers. He focuses on making a new Kingdom, a new culture from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.

As fellow citizens, we have the opportunity to serve and love the newest members as we gather here. It is here in this place every Lord's Day where our citizenship is lived out most explicitly; here we fit in as well as anywhere, and we do what God has called us to do every day into all eternity. We care and help one another. First, as Luke says, all of these new members operated as one acculturated community. They did things together, from giving to those in need to providing hospitality for one another. In other words, they became sensitive to others and their needs.

This time on Sunday morning is tailor-made for community bonding. Before we are called to worship, and after the Benediction, our sensitivities should be set to “high” regarding others. Have I met that family? Are those who just walked in visiting? Can I invite them to sit with me? Can I show them the nursery, where the bathrooms are, or where we provide coffee? Entering into a new country, a new culture, can be intimidating and confusing. As Kingdom citizens, we want to provide as much comfort and initial familiarity to our community as we possibly can. It is here where our culture, rooted in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, should be warm, inviting and welcoming. We love one another because the One we serve has loved us into eternity. Sensitivity to those we don’t know, or don’t know well, must be set on high.

But one of the most important things we can do *during* corporate worship is give ourselves over to the work of worship we’ve been preparing for these last few days. We sing hearty and joyfully in this place as if we are in the car by ourselves belting out a song on the radio. We join our hearts in prayer as the minister prays on our behalf. We confidently and silently confess our sin, promising to be ministered to and received by our Triune God in that confession. This is one of the most unifying aspects of our Service: Kingdom Citizens confessing their sin to the only One who can rectify, repair, and reconcile.

We publicly give ourselves over to the profession of faith, to the celebration of the Sacraments, and to the reading and preaching of the Word. Here we affirm and believe together that it is God’s Word that equips all of us for every good work. It is here in the reading and preaching of God’s Word where we remember the words of our Lord that we find life. We affirm that it is not bread alone by which we live, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God. It is in the audible and visible Means of Grace in God’s Word that we find the substance of our Kingdom citizenship. It is in these primary means where we find the Lord Jesus.

Then, we are sent out with the covering of God’s promise of blessing and peace in the Benediction. The blessing and peace are important—they seek the continued fellowship of the Triune God and His people.

### **III. After**

Immediately after the service, we stay and encourage one another. We make small talk, and invest in relationships. Maybe a particular hymn we sang ministered to you, and you tell someone about it. Were you especially encouraged by the sermon or the words of blessing in the Benediction? Share that with a fellow Kingdom citizen before they leave. Perhaps you know of a particular struggle of a friend and you thought of them at a particular point in the sermon. Or you knew of some financial difficulties they are facing, so you prayed for them during the Offering while giving your money. Tell them these things. Even here on Sunday morning, before we leave this place, we demonstrate how we do indeed have all things in common. We are all sinners saved by grace living life in a fallen world as new Kingdom citizens. How can this be front and center in our relationships? Maybe we carry these conversations over lunch together as we leave?

We enter into a new week after celebrating together, in this place, our union with Jesus and union with one another. We carry this reality with us and it ought to be what we lead with. Visibly we are going about our days, knocking out the tasks in front of us, and addressing the trivialities that come with each new day. But by faith we are still united to one another and to Jesus. The way we access this privileged unity, as Kingdom citizens, is by taking our cue from Acts 2 again. We pray for one another, contact one another, and host one another in our homes as we eat and drink and receive it all with glad and generous hearts.

As Kingdom citizens, what we do here each week is the central and necessary component of our lives. Think of our time here being represented by the central point in a centrifugal force amusement park ride. In this spinning, dynamic center where the Spirit is doing His most important work, we receive life and love in palpable ways. We devote ourselves to the preaching of God's Word, the fellowship of one another, and the Fellowship and Work of the Holy Spirit. We share in the Supper provided by the Lord Himself and our prayers to Him. There is a real power here, the source being the Triune God Himself, spinning us out into the world without ever compromising our union with Jesus or with one another. This power source, gained through a purposeful and intentional liturgy, pulls tight the binds of our union with Jesus and one another every week.

So we leave here seeking to grab those ties and pull ourselves closer to Him and to one another through whatever means necessary. We do this in our devotion to Him, but also in our commitment to love, serve, host, and pray for one another.

On Monday, we review the service, sing and pray through the hymns, review the sermon notes, and own the Benediction. Do this with Jesus front and center, but do it with others from this place in mind too. Do it all as you reflect on our Kingdom citizenship, and the King of the Kingdom to which we belong with our fellow citizens.

The culture of this day, the culture of this world, is ridiculously strong. The minute we walk outside and turn on our radios and TVs, pick up the local paper, surf the web, or catch up on our Twitter and Facebook newsfeeds, we are being formed and shaped, subtly but undeniably. There is much hand wringing, perhaps rightly so, about all of what we see going on in our culture at large. Things seem to be going from bad to worse. If we're not careful, we can look at what is happening all around us, what may happen when our Supreme Court makes certain rulings, and think, "Oh my, this is bad. Really, really bad." And, of course, it is. We should not be surprised. God isn't about reforming or restoring a culture on the fast track in rebellion against Him. He is about saving a people, placing them in union with His Son and building a new Kingdom culture with Kingdom citizens committed to Him and one another.

In the spirit of Acts 2, let me suggest some modest proposals for how we too can practically live as faithful Kingdom citizens, and fight the cultural pull of our day. The strongest antidote we have to the culture of the prince of the power of the air (Satan and his minions) is the Lord Jesus and the restoration He promises to bring through His people.

With that in mind, let me link all of this "before, during and after" preparation and participation together and suggest a few ways to fight for your Kingdom citizenship.

When you walk into the building on Sunday morning, seek out one person you do not know or have not spoken to before. Greet them and welcome them. If they are first time visitors, ask them how you can help them find their way around this place.

As you walk into this room, sit by someone you don't know or don't know well, and sit in different places every week. Remember, we are not all Kingdom citizens, but we are all family. Find a place to sit by a family member you haven't gotten to know. Then worship your heart out. Sing loudly, pray desperately, listen actively, and come quickly to the Lord's Table. It is contagious and you will be surprised how your actions spread.

As you leave this place, pick out one person or one family you want to follow up with in the week to come. Maybe the follow-up is a simple phone call, asking them how you can pray for them. Maybe it is inviting them over for coffee, or the family over for dinner. On some weeks, you may be aware of someone's particular struggle. Offer to bring them dinner or to babysit their kids while a husband and wife grab some much-needed alone time. Maybe you rotate each of these ideas per week. One week, you call. One week, you open your home. One week, you babysit their kids. Think creatively and intentionally and try to spread the wealth of your Kingdom citizenship. This is Kingdom culture in service to our King, the Lord Jesus. It is the fruit of corporate worship, our union with Him and with one another.

Here is what we are after: giving as much real-time flesh to our union with Jesus and union with one another that our Kingdom citizenship testifies to, using our hour and a half together as the centerpiece. All of who we are and what we do comes to full fruition when we gather. It makes sense that we give ourselves over to preparing ourselves for it and living off it in the weeks ahead. But that ought to be done in the context of fellowship, hospitality, the breaking of bread, and the receiving of it all with generous and glad hearts. It doesn't come naturally. It is not our reflex. We must commit to this new Kingdom culture and intentionally, deliberately, and purposefully give ourselves over to it with planning and prayer.

God takes the small and faithful acts of His Kingdom citizens and shakes the universe by and through them. He does this not to reform and restore the cultural rot out there, but to create a new Kingdom culture of His people that cannot and will not be shaken. May God bless us in our pursuit of this very same Kingdom that cannot be shaken.