

CHRIST COVENANT CHURCH

Lord's Day Worship | *Our Liturgy Explained*

Introductory Notes

What is Lord's Day Worship?

It is the most important thing you can do each week. Why? Because the very purpose of our existence is to worship God, and to do so in the presence of God with the people of God. It is the primary activity that extends from this world to the next. In this supernatural event, what fundamentally takes place is God comes to meet with his people. Yes, when God's people gather to worship him, he is actually present with them in a unique way.

Moreover, in worship we not only come to offer our praise to God, but we come to have something done to us. What is done to us in Worship? God shapes us. God comes to us and speaks to us through his Word, and like a master potter, shapes us into the image of Christ. We come to have our minds, our loves, our desires, and indeed our whole selves, shaped and trained by God himself through his Word. We come to be fed the true Bread of Life through his Word. Therefore, our entire service is filled with God's Word. We read the Word, sing the Word, pray the Word, preach the Word, hear the Word, and see, touch, taste, and smell the Word through the sacraments. Just as the Word comes to the whole man in worship, so also, in worship the whole man is shaped by the Word.

The Shape of Lord's Day Worship

The shape of Lord's Day Worship is covenantal. What does this mean? Worship follows the covenantal structure that God establishes throughout the Old Testament: call—cleansing—consecrating—communing—commissioning (see Ex. 24; Lev. 9; 2 Chron. 5–7, 29:20–36). Throughout the Old Testament, God's people were repeatedly sinning against God and breaking the covenant. But God never (permanently) casts them out of this blessed covenant relationship with him. Rather, God comes to his people again and again to renew his covenant with them—to remind them of his precious promises.

The coming of Jesus did not abolish the covenantal nature of God's dealings with his people, and therefore we continue to follow this same covenantal structure in our worship services. In fact, this structure follows the gospel itself. God has called, cleansed, consecrated, communed, and commissioned us in Christ, and we relive this gospel story every time we gather to worship.

It is also important to remember that God sets the terms of how we are to worship him, not us. The standards of our worship should not be what we think would be most enjoyable, or what would make our worship more “authentic,” or worse, what would be more comfortable to the unbelieving world (though it should welcome the curious). If we are bored with worship, or if the service begins to feel rote, the fault lies with us, not with God.

Children in Worship

Worship is the most important thing we do. This is no less true for our children than it is for adults. Like mentioned above, one of the fundamental reasons God's people gather on the Lord's day is to meet with their God. He comes to feed his Word to his people, and our children need this just as much as we do. Of course, worship is to be reverent and joyful, but not sterile. Children are a glorious blessing, not a curse; and we communicate this by gladly inviting them into the most central aspect of God's covenant people. In fact, worshipping with our covenant children is one of the most significant ways we parent as Christians. In it parents train their children to love what they themselves love. Yes, this is hard work, but it is glorious and fruitful work. Therefore, we heartily welcome these little children (along with their squeaks and noises!) who are being trained how to worship their King.

Order of Service

Preparation for Worship

We spend this time meditating on a passage of Scripture that calls to mind the holiness and greatness of our God. Because the primary purpose of Lord's Day Worship is to meet with our God, we ought to prepare ourselves to do so. We see that God's people were commanded to make preparations to meet with him in Exodus 19. God said he was to meet with his people on the third day, so they were to prepare themselves to meet with their holy God (10–11). Similarly, we take time before the service to put away our worldly thoughts and cares in order to prepare our hearts and minds to come into God's presence.

God Calls Us

God is a speaking God. It is by his Word that he created the world, and it is by his Word that he has begun the work of new creation in all those who have trusted in Christ. God is the divine initiator of all his covenantal dealings with his people (e.g. John 6:44–45). He is the one who calls his people out of darkness and into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). In turn, his people respond to this call with repentance and faith. This covenantal dialogue between God and his people is what is reflected in our worship. God speaks to us his Word, and we respond in praise and thanksgiving.

Call to Worship

The service begins with God calling his people to come and worship him (e.g. Numbers 10:1–3). Just as God called his people out of slavery in Egypt so they might worship him, so also he has called us out of our slavery to sin in order to worship him. Every Lord's day he again, through the minister, calls us into his presence to worship him.

Prayer of Invocation

The prayer of invocation is our response to God's call to worship. And what is our response to this call to worship? A plea for help! In the invocation we call on (invoke) the name of the Lord to help us to worship him rightly—in “spirit and truth” (John 4:24). We also ask for his presence and favor, and praise him for his greatness.

Hymn

God's people have always been a singing people. This is because God himself is a singing God. In Scripture, God is spoken of as a great composer of songs (1 Kings 4:29, 32). David says in Psalm 40:3 that it was God who “put a new song in his mouth,” the Lord is also described as one who “exults over his people with loud singing” (Zephaniah 3:17). Indeed, the whole book of Psalms is God's own inspired songbook.

Therefore, in song, God's people do three things: praise, pray, and proclaim. They join with one voice to praise the Lord for his greatness, offer their prayers to him, and proclaim his glorious truth. We conclude each hymn or psalm with a hearty “Amen!” from the congregation as a short confession of faith. By doing so, we are confessing that the praise, prayer, and proclamation just sung is true.

We also sing songs that the church has been singing for centuries. When we are born again, God puts a new song into our souls. When we sing the songs that the church has sung for millennia, we recognize that the song the Lord has placed in us is a song that has been sung by Christians for centuries. We hear our own experience of grace echoed in the songs of the church throughout the ages. And in this way, we find the church much bigger than we may have expected. We are by no means against contemporary hymns. But if these are all we sing, we are rejecting the wisdom and the spiritual insight of those Christians who have come before us. Our generation is not a wise or a spiritual enough generation that can afford to reject these great hymns.

God Cleanses Us

How can a sinful people be in covenant with a holy God? Their sin needs to be dealt with. Sin cannot dwell in the presence of God (Psalm 5:4), and sinful people cannot be in covenant with God. Throughout Scripture, when sinful people come into the presence of a holy God we always see the same response: confession of their sin (see Isaiah 6:1–5). But the good news is that God has dealt with our sin in Christ. In him, our sin is atoned for (Isaiah 6:7; Romans 8:1), and we are counted holy, blameless and above reproach (Colossians 1:22). However, even though we are counted righteous in Christ, we still battle our sin in this life. Because of this, God calls us to confess our sins (James 5:16) and to hear the assurance of his pardon in Christ. This is why each week we spend time both confessing our sin to God, and hearing the glorious verdict pronounced on us—NOT GUILTY! We need to have this declaration stamped on us again and again.

Reading of the Law

For the Christian, one of the primary uses of the law is to guide us in living holy lives. We are not to despise the law. In fact, we can say along with David, that the law is perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, true, righteous, more to be desired than fine gold, and sweeter than honey (Psalm 19:7–10).

But another use of the law is to show us our sin and need for a savior (Romans 7:7). The law shows us all the times that we have not lived up to God's standards. The law uncovers the "sinful pollutions" of our "nature, heart, and lives" (Westminster Confession of Faith 19.6). We read God's law to be reminded of our sin, and to uncover the sinful desires of our deceitful hearts (1 John 1:8). Being reminded of this, we then respond with confession (Nehemiah 8:2–6).

Confession of Sin

Having been reminded that we have all fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) we respond in confession of our sin. Indeed, even after coming to Christ, we fail to live up to what God commands us in his Word. As sinners, confessing our sin does not come naturally. Sin by its very nature wants to hide from God's holiness. But we are called to drag it into the light of God's presence (Isaiah 6:5; 2 Kings 22:11–13; James 5:16). This is why each week we confess our sins both corporately and privately. Corporately we confess our sins by reciting a written confession. Just as the key to learning a foreign language is constant exposure to it, so the weekly corporate confession trains us in the language and liturgy of confession, both to one another and to God. Privately, we confess our particular sins to God, asking that he would once again be gracious to us for the ways we have transgressed his law.

Assurance of Pardon

With our confession barely coming off our lips, we stand to receive once again the Lord's glorious verdict in Christ—not guilty (Isaiah 6:6–7)! On the authority of God's Word, the minister declares the forgiveness that believers have in Christ. He reminds them of the glorious promise that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Again, corporate worship is a tangible retelling of the gospel, and each week we need to have the promise of forgiveness in Christ impressed on our souls once again.

Confession of Faith

As those who have been called by God and forgiven all our sins in Christ, we now stand to confess our faith in our Triune God. In the confession, we not only confess what we believe to be true, but we confess it publicly, as Jesus commanded us to do (Matthew 10:32–33). Because there is no such thing as a "private Christian," we stand as a congregation to publicly and wholeheartedly confess our faith—a faith confessed by the church throughout the centuries.

God Consecrates Us

When we speak of God consecrating us, we are not only speaking of being separated from something (i.e. our sin), but also that we are separated for something, or actually for Someone (Exodus 19:6). In this respect, the whole service could be considered one of consecration. However, God's prime appointed instrument for the building up of his church is the reading, and especially the preaching, of his Word. For Jesus prays in John 17:17, "Sanctify (consecrate) them in the truth, your word is truth."

Scripture Reading

We see the reading of Scripture in corporate worship instituted all the way back in Deuteronomy 31:9–12. When the men, women and children gathered to meet with God, the Scriptures were opened and read so that "they can listen and learn to fear the Lord" (v. 12). We see this practice continued in the early church as well (1 Timothy 4:13; Colossians 4:16). We must remember that when the Scriptures are read, it is God's very words that are spoken to us through the minister. In order to have a well-balanced diet of both Old and New Testaments, normally if we are preaching from the New Testament our Scripture reading will be taken from the Old Testament, and vice versa.

Congregational Prayer

The temple in the Old Testament is described by Jesus as "a house of prayer" (Mark 11:17; cf. Isaiah 56:7). So also in the New Testament one of the things that the early church devoted themselves to when they gathered together was prayer (Acts 2:42). Therefore, our services are filled with prayer. We have corporate prayers, silent prayers, prayers led by the minister, and sung prayers in Hymns/Psalms. This "Congregational Prayer" is one led by the minister (cf. 1 Kings 8:26ff; Nehemiah 8:6), but it is not only the minister who should be praying. Though the minister may be leading the prayer, the whole congregation prays with him, offering their silent amen along with these adorations, thanksgivings, confessions, and petitions.

Singing Psalms

The book of Psalms is the inspired songbook of the Lord, and it is to the church's great peril that they neglect this great treasure trove of inspired songs. He has given his people these great songs to sing back to him. In fact, God commands churches to sing psalms (e.g. Ephesians 5:29; Colossians 3:16). Though these are not the only songs we sing, they should be joyfully sung every week in the worship of God's people. For in them, we see theological depth along with the wide range of human emotion and experience that modern songs often do not give us (mourning and lamentation, imprecation, joyful praise, etc.). What better songs for us and our children to have lodged in our heads throughout the week than the very songs of our Lord?

Preaching of the Word

Preaching is the center of the worship service. Why? Because in preaching, Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, speaks through the minister expounding and applying the Word. Indeed the message of the preacher belongs so intimately to Christ that it is as if Christ himself were in the pulpit. For in the preaching of the Word of God, the very Word of God is proclaimed (Ephesians 2:17; 1 Peter 4:11; see also the Second Helvetic Confession chapter 1). Because of this, as theologian J.I. Packer points out, “for congregations, the hearing of sermons is the most momentous event of their lives...”. When the Word of God is preached, we should listen as if Christ himself is addressing us.

God Communes With Us

God is a God of communion. He loves to commune with his people. In fact, ever since the beginning, worship has followed a pattern that culminates in a feast. This is because God has created feasting to be one of the most potent forms of fellowship. Indeed, all of creation is moving towards the great feast of Christ and his people (Isaiah 25:6–8; Revelation 19:6–10), where God and his people will feast in perfect fellowship. In the Lord’s Supper, we get a taste of this great meal that is to come. What is signified in this meal is the whole Christ with all his gifts, benefits, and graces, applied and given to our souls (see Westminster Shorter Catechism 96).

The Lord's Supper

The sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) have been referred to as “visible words.” They are ways God communicates his grace to his people. When God makes a promise to his people, he attaches to them physical signs as a reminder of these promises (e.g. the rainbow). This is particularly true in the Lords Supper. As Puritan Robert Bruce described, “The Word leads us to Christ by the ear; the Sacraments lead us to Christ by the eye...”. Just as the audible Word brings Christ to the mind through our ears, so also the sacrament brings Christ to the mind through the eye. Now, the Lord’s Supper doesn’t just bring Christ to our minds, like, for example, a picture of a cross might do. Rather, in the supper we have real communion with Christ. This is not in any physical way, but rather in a spiritual way—by faith. By faith, the believer is spiritually nourished by Christ in this meal. As soon as we receive the bread and wine in our mouths, we receive the body and blood of Christ in our souls. Though we eat these physical elements with our mouths, we come to the table to eat with the “mouth of faith” as our souls are fed by Christ. In the supper we are reminded that Christ is our final Passover lamb whose blood cleanses us from sin and frees us from death. In this meal we get to see, touch, and taste Christ and all his benefits in a better way. Not that we get a better Christ in this meal, but we do get Christ better.

Fencing the Table

This meal is not for those who do not have “communion” with Christ. We are warned in 1 Corinthians 11:27–29, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord... For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.” Therefore, this meal is for believers only. It is for all those who have made a valid profession of faith, have been baptized, and are members in good standing in any evangelical church (see PCA Book of Church Order 58–4).

Sursum Corda

How should we understand the fellowship we have with Christ in this meal? It is not as though the elements are transformed into the body and blood of Christ, so as to physically bring Christ down on our table. No. Christ is currently at the right hand of the Father. However, as we have seen, Christ is spiritually present in this meal by the power of the Holy Spirit. By faith, the Spirit lifts us to the heavenly places to have our souls nourished by Christ (Ephesians 2:4,6; Colossians 3:2–3). This is why we use the *sursum corda* before the supper (Latin for “Lift up your hearts!”). The *sursum corda* was used by the early church fathers and reformers to remind us of this real union and communion we have with our Savior.

Prayer of Consecration

In this prayer, we do not believe that any physical change happens to the elements. Rather, we set these ordinary elements of bread and wine apart for holy purposes. Though they remain bread and wine, they are now used to communicate Christ and all his benefits to his people who come, not to be nourished by physical bread and wine, but to be spiritually nourished by Christ.

Partaking of the Bread and Wine

In 1 Corinthians 10:16 Paul asks, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” Therefore when we partake of this meal together, the minister reminds us of the spiritual presence of Christ in this meal by saying the following:

- “The bread which we break is to us a participation in the body of Christ. Take and eat.”
- “The cup that we bless is to us a participation in the blood of Christ. Take and drink.”

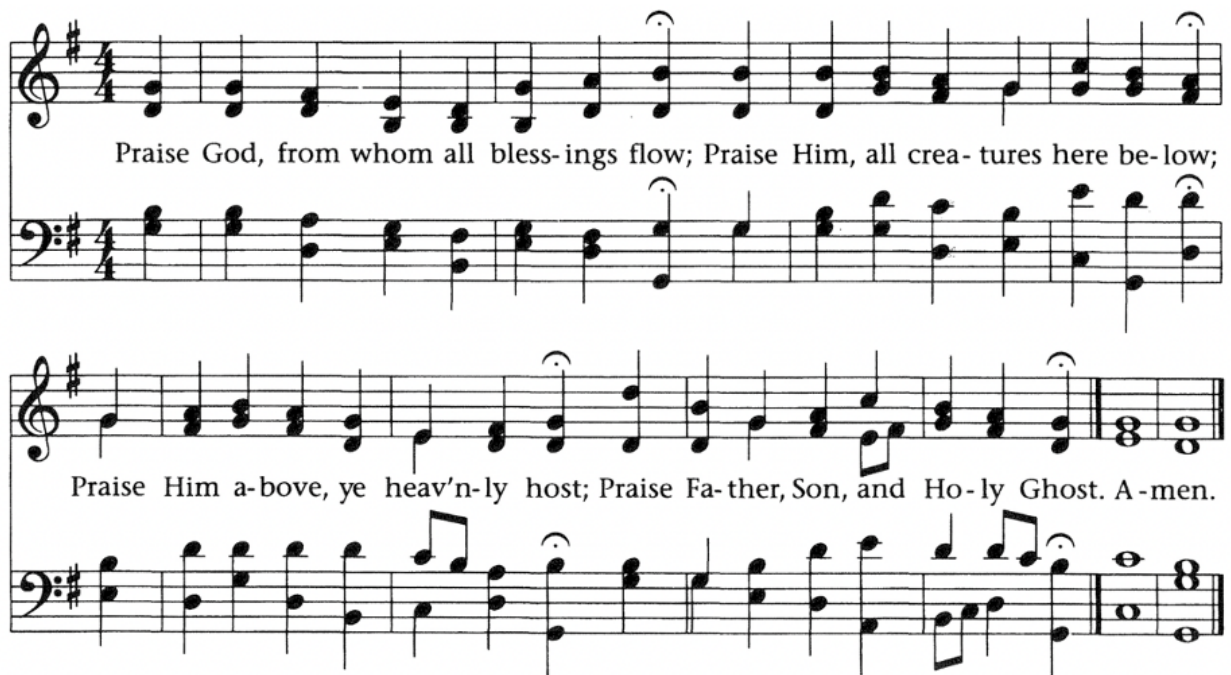
Offering

Isn't money carnal and worldly? What place does giving of a monetary offering have in worship? Giving ("offering") to God is an important act of worship. In the Old Testament, God commanded his people to bring their tithes in the context of temple worship (Numbers 18:24; Deuteronomy 12:5–19). Indeed, Malachi boldly and frankly declared that anyone who refused to give money for the temple service was robbing God (Malachi 3:8–9). Of course, in the New Testament we do not continue the animal sacrifice that was tied to temple worship, as Christ is our final sacrificial lamb. However, we are still commanded to give to support the work of the church and to aid the poor (Galatians 2:10; 1 Corinthians 9:3–14). We see this collection taking place on the Lord's Day in 1 Corinthians 16:1–2. We also see that these gifts are acts of worship (Philippians 4:18). Therefore, the giving of offerings ought to be a regular part of worship in the lives of God's people.

God Commissions Us

Doxology

In these 25 humble words, we sing profound truths and invoke all things in heaven and earth to praise the Triune God. He is the one from whom all blessings flow (James 1:17), where fullness of joy is found (Psalm 16:11), and the one who deserves all praise and glory, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36).



Praise God, from whom all bless-ings flow; Praise Him, all crea-tures here be-low;

Praise Him a-bove, ye heav'n-ly host; Praise Fa-ther, Son, and Ho-ly Ghost. A-men.

Scripture Charge

Due to sin, the communion feast is no longer the culmination of covenantal worship. Rather, as we long for the final meal of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, we have been given the great charge to gather more worshipers (Matthew 28:18–20). In the scripture charge we are reminded of the instruction the Lord has given to us as we go back into our families and communities as the Lord's peculiar people.

Benediction

God brings worship to a close by pronouncing his blessing upon us through the minister (Leviticus 9:22; Numbers 6:23; Luke 24:50–51; 2 Corinthians 13:14). The benediction is the final service God renders to his congregation as a whole on the Lord's Day. Through the minister, the Lord assures us of his peace, promises, and his gracious presence as we leave his special presence and return to the world. Indeed Jesus' final recorded act was to lift up his hands and give a blessing to his disciples (Luke 24:50). Therefore the benediction is something that the congregation receives from the Lord, and is why they stretch out their hands in a posture of reception.