



UNIVERSITY
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Why Do We Do That?
A Guide to UPC Worship

Introduction

Mankind was created to worship God; this is our "chief end" (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.1). The problem is, we have chosen to "worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25), preferring the love of self rather than the love of our Maker. In our sin, we have abandoned the fullest joys and eternal pleasures found only in God's presence (Psalm 16:11). However, as Christians who are reconciled to God through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, we are able, by the grace of God, to fulfill our chief end once again. As Christians, we live to worship the Lord.

Yet this is not something we do merely in private, but in public. As those who belong to Jesus Christ, we belong not only to Christ as Head but also to His body, the Church. And as Christ's church, God has called us to gather together, week after week, and meet with Him. He's called us to engage in a divine-human dialogue whereby He speaks to us through His Word and Spirit, and we respond with prayers and offerings of joyful thanksgiving. In this amazing event, God renews His covenant with us: He puts on a real-life drama of redemption and incorporates us into His grand salvation story, thereby creating and equipping disciples of Jesus Christ from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

However, God not only deeply cares *that* we worship Him but *how*. Going all the way back to the 15th and 16th century Protestant Reformation, Reformed Christians have believed that we are to approach God according to His divine appointment, that we might "offer to God acceptable worship" (Hebrews 12:28). In other words, Scripture itself is the rule for our worship at UPC (John 4:23-24; cf. Exodus 20:4-6). As a result, rather than being bound by the latest worship fads, we are freed to center worship on God Himself, while approaching Him with the "joy and gladness" that only He can provide through His faithful Word (Psalm 45:15; 119:111).

Here are the basic elements of our worship at UPC. Some elements might seem strange to you – especially if you've never been to church before. Lord-willing, this guide will help you be more engaged in the worship of our great God - both in mind and heart - as we participate together in the worship of the One whose glory fills the earth (Isaiah 6:3).

Call to Worship

The Greek word for “church” is “ecclesia,” which means “those who are called out from.” As those who belong to Jesus Christ, God has called us out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His Son (Colossians 1:13; 1 Peter 2:9). In other words, God’s summoning word creates the church (Psalm 29:3-11; Acts 12:24). Likewise in our worship, God Himself creates the gathering, calling us from our ordinary lives into His extraordinary presence, like a King summoning His servants. And He does so through His revealed Word. Two prime examples of the Call to Worship in Scripture are Psalms 66 and 100.

Corporate Singing

Our songs of worship are simply prayers set to music. At certain times of the worship service, we will sing songs of praise, confession, lament, thanksgiving, and other genres – using psalms, hymns, and various worship songs – all accompanied by instruments. Singing with fellow Christians is a practice that goes back to the earliest saints. It is also one of God’s chief appointed means whereby He is glorified and the Gospel transforms our lives as individuals and as a congregation, causing the “word of Christ to dwell in us richly” (Colossians 3:16; cf. Ephesians 5:18-21).

Call to Confession

God speaks to us both in Law and Gospel. In the reading of God’s Law, we hear of His perfect will for our lives, what the Creator requires of His creatures: to love Him and our neighbor in thought, word, and deed. It is here that God tells us *why* we need a Savior: because we are guilty and corrupt sinners (Romans 3:21-26). After all, as Jesus said, “those who are well have no

need of a physician, but those who are sick;" Christ came "not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:12-13).

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Having heard God's holy law, we then extol our God as the Fountain of all holiness, goodness, justice, and truth. And yet, even as we adore the God who is holy, we confess that we are not like Him - that we are radically UNholy in the living of our lives. Like King David in Psalms 32 and 51, the holiness of God drives us to confess our sins to whom we have sinned against: the Lord. We confess that, apart from a Savior, we are guilty sinners, fully deserving of everlasting punishment (Romans 6:23). And moreover, like the doomed citizens of Ninevah, we appeal to God's mercy during this confession, trusting that God will show steadfast love and pity upon those who ask it of Him (Jonah 3:10; Psalm 103:8; 145:8). In this portion of the service, we will confess our sins both corporately *and* privately.

Words of Assurance

As God had first announced His Law, He now announces His Gospel, declaring the good news that what the Law demands, Jesus Christ provides (Romans 3:21-26; Titus 3:4-7; 1 John 4:9-10). In this element of the worship service, God declares sinners to be simultaneously saints - that all who hear and believe the word of the Gospel with true faith are pardoned of their sins and welcomed into the kingdom of God with open arms as a new creation in Him (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Matthew 16:19; 18:18-20; Romans 4:17; Galatians 3:2; 2 Corinthians 4:6).

Passing of the Peace

In the Gospel, we're not only reconciled to God but to each other (Colossians 3:1-17; 2 Thessalonians 3:16; 1 Peter 1:22-23; 1 John 4:11). Christ's work of reconciliation offers us not only forgiveness of our sins but also the possibility of genuine fellowship and peace in community. Indeed, God has called us to be ministers of His reconciliation in our day-to-day lives (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). Therefore, during this portion of the service, following the pattern of the early Christians, we take a minute to share gestures of reconciliation and Christian love

with one another (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; Galatians 1:3; 1 Timothy 1:2).

Scripture Reading

Timothy commands the church to be devoted to “the public reading of Scripture” (1 Timothy 4:13). For sure, God's Word is a “lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path” (Psalm 119:105); it's what constitutes us as the people of God. Therefore, in this part of our service, a Scripture passage thematically in line with the forthcoming sermon text is publicly read. Afterward, the reader will recite words taken from Isaiah 40:6-8, and the congregation will respond in thanksgiving for God's eternal Word.

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Supplication

Throughout the New Testament, the church is commanded to pray (Matthew 6:5-15; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; 1 Timothy 2:1-4). In fact, the early saints prayed whenever they gathered together (Acts 2:42; 12:12). At UPC, we believe in the absolute importance and indispensability of prayer. The Heidelberg Catechism calls it “the chief part of our thankfulness that we owe to God” (Q/A 116). During this part of the worship service, an elder lifts up prayers of thanksgiving and supplication for God's continued provision, interceding before the throne of God on behalf of the congregation through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26-27).

Tithes and Offering

Like the prayers and the songs, this part of the liturgy is another opportunity to express our thanksgiving to God for all that He has done as our Creator and Redeemer. Only here, our thanksgiving is in the form of a financial gift. We believe that God is glorified through our offerings, for it is through our offerings that we are able to love our neighbor and “contribute to the needs of the saints” (Romans 12:13). Monetary sacrifices are a means for God to exercise His fatherly care over His people. However, as with all forms of worship, God not only cares *that* we give, but *how* we give (2 Corinthians 8 and 9): we are to give lovingly and cheerfully, “knowing the grace of our Lord Jesus

Christ, that though He was rich, yet for our sake He became poor” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Prayer for Illumination

Just prior to the sermon, we take a moment and ask for the Holy Spirit to open our sometimes deaf ears and hardened hearts (Psalm 119:18), to “illumine” or “enlighten” us, that we might rightly understand and receive the preaching of the Word. To be sure, unless the Spirit accompanies the Word that is proclaimed, it will be the mere words of man. It is the Holy Spirit alone who brings “wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God” (Ephesians 1:17), who “guides us into all truth” (John 16:13; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:10-13).

Sermon

The Apostle Paul says that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” (Romans 10:17), and that we receive the Spirit of God through “hearing with faith” (Galatians 3:2). The preaching of the Word of God is at the heart of our worship service, for it is in this sacred event that the doors of the kingdom of God are open to those who believe and closed to those who disbelieve. Preaching is not simply “teaching,” although it is certainly this. Rather, in the public proclamation of the “living and active” Word (Hebrews 4:12), a Word that always “accomplishes that for which it is sent” (Isaiah 55:11), the dead are raised to life, the lost are found, and the blind are given sight. In the preaching event, as “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27) is proclaimed from Genesis to Revelation, God builds His kingdom, constructing a new heavenly society in and around His Word.

Prayer of Application

After the sermon is complete, we again express our reliance upon the work of the Holy Spirit, requesting that He would graciously apply the glorious truths of the Word of God to our hearts and lives. After all, it is the Spirit alone who “gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6), who applies the accomplished work of Jesus Christ to our souls (John 16:14).

Confession of Faith

As those who are saved by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), we as the church are also bound together by our faith - by what we believe (Ephesians 4:1-6). And God has called us to express what we believe as His church, to not only believe with the heart *privately* but to confess with the mouth *publicly* (Romans 10:9). Indeed, we find such confessions in God's Word (Deuteronomy 6:4; Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Timothy 3:16). In the morning service, we confess creeds and other historic statements of faith, all which serve to unite us together with every Christian throughout the world and throughout time.

The Lord's Supper

Having heard God's Word and corporately confessed the truths of that Word, we now participate in the "amen" of that Word: a confirming sign and seal of God's promises in the Gospel. On the night of His betrayal, the Lord Jesus commanded His church throughout the ages to observe a feast consisting of bread and wine (Luke 22:14-23; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26), a feast designed to strengthen the faith of His people. In this feast, what we call a "sacrament" (from the Latin *sacramentum* meaning "mystery"), we not only remember Christ - His broken body and shed blood on the cross - but we also participate in Him as His people (1 Corinthians 10:16). Through faith, we partake of the true body and blood of Christ by the power of the Spirit and therein mature in our union with Him - becoming increasingly "bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh" (Genesis 2:23) - and therein, with one another as His people (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Mystery of Our Faith

The mystery of our faith (often called the "memorial acclamation") is an element of our liturgy that has been observed by the Christian Church, both East and West, going back to sometime before the 6th century. Herein, we confess the Gospel truths that we just heard in God's Word and celebrated in the Lord's Supper - the death, resurrection, and return of Christ - and therein express our unity around the Gospel. We call it a "mystery" not because it is difficult to understand, but because these are truths that, though once hidden in darkness, have now

been revealed to the saints (Romans 16:25-27; Ephesians 1:7-10; 3:1-10; Colossians 1:24-27).

Benediction

Just as God spoke the first word in His worship service, calling us to worship, He speaks the last word. "Benediction" comes from the Latin "benedictio," which means "good speaking." The Benediction is God's "good word" for His beloved people, His fond farewell to His treasured saints. As the service closes and we go out into the world once again, God assures us of His steadfast love and faithfulness in Christ, announcing His continued grace in our lives, in body and soul, in life and death. After all, this was God's final word to the churches in Scripture (2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 6:23-24; Philippians 4:23; 1 Thessalonians 5:28; 1 Peter 5:14; cf. Numbers 6:24-26). Moreover, this being a promise from our dear Father Himself, participants are encouraged to extend their hands during this element of the liturgy, indicating a posture of reception.

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