

The shape and sound of corporate worship in the Reformed tradition varies from one congregation to another. In part that is a consequence of our worship being governed by a Directory for Worship rather than a Prayer Book (in which the forms for worship are clearly delineated), and it is in part a consequence of the balance we have historically sought to maintain between freedom and form in our liturgical practices. There are, however, some basic emphases that have historically characterized Reformed or Presbyterian worship.

Reformed or Presbyterian worship focuses on the praise and adoration of God rather than the experience of the worshiper. We often will measure a service by what we got out of it, how it made us feel, or if we liked or disliked the music or the message. And while we ought to be able to expect to receive something from worship and even feel something *in* worship, you and I are not the primary concern. Christian corporate worship is first and foremost *about* God and for *God*. This conviction is revealed in the hymns we sing, the prayers we render, and the sermons we preach. Everything is secondary to this most important conviction. Nineteenth-century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard's analogy of worship to the theater is helpful in this regard. Most of us, he said, tend to think of the minister or worship leader as the actor in worship,

God as the prompter, and the congregation as the audience. Worship then is something that we go to watch. It is something performed for us. However, it really is the other way around. God is the audience, the minister or worship leader the prompter, and the members of the congregation are the actors in this divine drama. God is the focus and the audience for our liturgy, our "sacred work."

Reformed worship engages the people as participants and not merely as observers. The sixteenth-century Reformers sought to return worship to the people by insisting that the service be conducted in the language of the people and that all parts of the service be spoken audibly; by insisting that the people participate fully in the Lord's Supper; and by introducing congregationally sung hymns and metrical psalms. The role of the worshiper was not merely to listen, but actively to be involved. The level of participation by the people today may vary from congregation to congregation, but Reformed worship is always worship that involves the people. The liturgy is quite literally the "work of the people."

Reformed worship is a Word-centered liturgy. The sixteenth-century Reformers set out to reform the church and the worship of the church in light of the practice of the ancient church and the teaching of the Bible. While there is no developed liturgy in the Scriptures, there are insights or

glimpses into the worship practices of the early church. Acts 2:42 tells us that our early Christian mothers and fathers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." This passage was for the Reformers a key paradigm for worship. They understood it as describing not a liturgical order but the essential components of worship. Consequently, there are some things we do in worship because the Bible tell us they belong in the worship of God: reading Scripture, preaching sermons, singing psalms and hymns, offering prayers, and celebrating the sacraments. There are other things that we do in accordance with biblical principles. For instance, scripture commands that we baptize in the name of the Trinity, but we pour, sprinkle, or even immerse, on the basis of the biblical principle that baptism is a washing with water. And some things, as long as they don't violate biblical teachings, are simply a matter of local choice and custom.

As important as its role in shaping the liturgy is the central place of Scripture in worship: the lessons that are read, the scripture used in the Call to Worship, Invitation to Confession, Assurance of Pardon, Invitation to the Lord's Table, etc. Ideally there should be readings from the Old Testament, the Epistle, and the Gospel. Too often in our services scripture is short-changed. Only one lesson is read or, in the extreme, only a few verses. In an age of bib-

lical illiteracy among American Christians, we need not *less* of Scripture in worship but *more!*

Reformed worship has also been characterized by an emphasis upon preaching as a means of grace. The word proclaimed on Sunday morning in the sermon is not merely the preacher's word, but by the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit the word that is proclaimed may well become for us God's own word, a word that has the power to change us. Preaching is more than speech; preaching is an event, an occasion in which we are encountered by God.

John Leith wrote that "the power of preaching as the Word of God does not reside in the sound of the words themselves, or even in their meaning. The power of preaching is the act of the Holy Spirit, which makes the words, the sounds and their meaning, the occasion of the voice of God." And what we hear is a word of grace, for preaching is ultimately the announcement of the good news of what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ.

Reformed worship is worship that is marked by order, dignity, and decorum. Presbyterians laugh in worship; Presbyterians enjoy worship; but Presbyterians have also traditionally understood worship as something rendered before the very throne of God, and God is, we believe, a God of order and not chaos. Consequently the wor-

ship we offer up to God is marked by order rather than confusion.

Reformed worship is worship marked by excellence. That is to say that the worship we seek to render to God in the liturgy is marked by the *best* that *we* have to bring. Please note that the emphasis is on both *best* and *we*. Someone else may be able to do something better than you or I; the truth is that there is always someone somewhere who can do it better. The important thing is this: is it the best that *you* have to bring, the best offering that *you* can make? That applies to the music the choir sings, the hymns you sing, the offering we place in the collection, the reading done by the lector, the leadership provided for worship, the sermon preached by the preacher. Is it the best you have to bring?

Worship



in the

Reformed Tradition

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