

## Thoughts on Worship

The Worship of the Triune God is the single most important recurring event in a Christian's life. It is in the Worship of God that the Christian learns who he is, what he is, where he is going, why he should go, and how to get there. At the center of this worship we find that the One who sustains all of life, our every breath, and ordains our every step, providing for and protecting us in every way, reveals Himself to us. He reveals Himself in His Word, in the Sacraments He gave us as signs and symbols, pointing to solid Truth, and in His Body, with whom we fellowship. Here is the font of all hope, all healing, all comfort, all peace...and we arrive five minutes late.

There is an apathy-like attitude that we modern Christians have when we gather together on Sunday's. I am hesitant to go all the way and call it apathy, for most of us are at least well intentioned when it comes to worship. But, well intentioned though we may be, we are prone to taking a lackadaisical view when it comes to our preparation for and participation in the Worship of God. We are content to do things that are comfortable, come naturally, seem easy, or that contain songs and ceremonies that a watching world would find interesting and inviting. But what about coming before God Almighty is comfortable? Is there anything about coming before a Thrice Holy God that comes naturally to sons of Adam, redeemed though we may be? *Should* worship be easy? What does that say about the importance we place on it? And why should the cares and sensibilities of a pagan, God-hating culture form the tastes and desires that dictate the manner of our Worship? These are important questions, and questions we are sadly slow in answering. But they are necessary to work through if we desire to be faithful to what God has called us to be, and that is *homo adorans*, worshipping man.

First, Should worship be comfortable? What is there that is comfortable in coming before the throne of the Creator of the universe, especially as we come on the merits of another? We cannot approach on the basis of anything we have accomplished. We can only come on the basis of Christ and His gift to us. How dare we presume on grace and come before the Father on Christ's back, and then demand our own rights and our own way. But we do in worship. We find many things in Scripture that make us uncomfortable, and rather than trust God with them and embrace them, we shy away and refuse to deal with them. Certain portions of Scripture offend our modern sensibilities (Psalm 139, Song of Solomon, parts of Ezekiel), and so we gloss over them, and do not allow the living and active Word of God to transform our sensibilities, conforming us to the image of Christ. We are afraid of trusting God with the hard things, and therefore neglect being faithful to His Word. Instead, we need to obey and pursue faithfulness in all things, and trust God with the outcome. Worship is not social hour. Worship is not a tea party. Worship is not "Weekend at the folks." The Worship of the Triune God is an event of cosmic proportions. Think about it soberly for one minute. We are approaching the omnipotent and sovereign God of all times, of all places, of all peoples, on someone else's good name no less. Where do we get off that there is anything comfortable about this? Just the thought of it should put the fear of God into our hearts, and it is with fear and trembling that we ought to approach the Throne.

Second, Should worship come naturally? Our first assumption here is that God is honored by anything, regardless of what is presented to Him, so long as our intentions are right. But where in Scripture do we see this? Ask Nadab and Abihu if they would agree with that. They were fried by heavenly fire the very minute they offered strange fire on the altar. Strange fire meant unauthorized by God. In the Old Covenant, God was very exact with how He was to be worshipped, and gave a very detailed account of how things needed to be. One degree to the left or the right meant death. Do we believe this God has changed any since the Old Covenant? Is He not the same God yesterday, today, and tomorrow? Does not Christ Himself display this zeal, twice, as He purges the temple of those who were misusing it? With a whip? And we approach this God expecting that the demands His Worship makes will come naturally to us, sinners whose thoughts are far, far below His thoughts. It seems pretty risky, knowing that God was extremely demanding in how He was to be approached, and that

those demands are very narrow in nature. Am I to assume that what comes naturally to me will “fortunately” align perfectly with His will? That would sure be nice. It seems more likely, however, that the worship of God does not come naturally to me, and that I need to learn what He has prescribed. Learn who He is, and how he requires us to approach Him. This means study, this means hard work, this means practice, and above all this means humility. I do not have unilateral freedom to decide how I approach the Throne of God, especially, again, on the good name of another. Our second assumption is this: what we learned as a child is the purest and most honest form of worship and therefore is suitable for the rest of our lives. But this flatly denies Scripture. When I was a child, I thought like a child, I spoke like a child. But when I became a man, I put off those childish things. Children grow up. This is the natural order of things. We move on from milk to meat. We cannot remain at our mother’s breast our entire life. We are called to growth and maturity. This again means hard work. It means patience and striving after a goal. It means letting go of blankets and teddy bears, and moving on to cars and houses. We grow up. This should not be a bleak picture either. Our society has placed a great deal of importance and primacy on childishness. This is apparent by the rampant immaturity that surrounds us. Teddy bears and blankets are not a higher form. They are not the peak with life just going downhill from there. With maturity comes deeper enjoyment, richer fellowship, more solid relationships, and a joy that is more real than any childhood experience can offer. This depth is only available to those who dig. You can’t have a diamond without an extreme amount of pressure. You can’t have a mine without a lot of mining. You can’t reach a mature age without living. Growing up is a good thing, contrary to what this country believes. We are built by God to move from milk to meat. And the meat is good.

Thirdly, Should worship be easy? It is a similar question as the one above, but from a different angle. Our economy and our culture thrives on everything that we have created to make our lives easy. Dishwashers, sprinklers, hot water heaters, cars, computers, credit cards, etc. The list is endless of the things we surround ourselves with to make our lives easier. This has trained our thinking to shy away from honest to godness effort. Instead of doing something ourselves and be rewarded with the satisfaction of accomplishment, we are quick to go online and buy it. We say, “I don’t know how to do that. Shouldn’t I just let someone who knows how to do it, do it for me?” This is our attitude. Rather than learning how to do something, we settle for the work of others. This is not in and of itself a bad thing. I’m glad there are trained police officers roaming the streets. I’m in favor of car manufacturers being highly skilled and trained in what they do, so that I can drive in peace, not afraid of falling apart. But we cannot let this be our automatic response. We are called to be fruitful and take dominion over the earth. The Creation Mandate still applies today. This does not mean that every time I am in a position where something is required of me, I can bow out because someone else does a better job. That is called abdication of responsibility. And it runs wild in our culture. This is something that many Christians would see and lament with me about. But the truth is, a lot of times we approach worship with this same attitude. Learning to sing well is too hard, so we leave it to the choir. Studying the Word takes too much time, so we leave it to the Pastor. Reaching out and fellowshiping with others, sharing the love of Christ with the unlovely, is simply too awkward, so we leave it to the gregarious ones. But we are all called to sing, all called to study, all called to love the unlovely. It is not a responsibility we can push on someone else. We are called to do it. And if it means learning how to do it, that’s what it means. We go and learn. But not knowing how is no excuse for not doing it. What I am saying should not imply that we do not know how to work hard. We do and will work hard when we find something worthwhile. We put the most effort and the most hard work into what we find most rewarding, and most important. How much effort you put into something, how much time, money, or thought, reveals the level of importance that something holds in your life. How do we approach the worship of God? Willing to learn to do things God’s way, even though it may (and will) mean hard work? Or do we come ready to allow others to fulfill our responsibility.

Lastly, Why do we think the tastes and opinions of the world matter when it comes to the worship of God? Why do God-hating pagans get a seat at the table when we decide what Scripture dictates we do on Sunday

Morning? Why do we find it necessary to be hip, cool, trendy, “with-it” when it comes to serving our Creator? Is Truth not eternal? Does Beauty change over time? We are called to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Is that just a cutesy phrase we put on our magnets with a picture of a sunset? Or does “the beauty of holiness” mean something? Beauty is defined by who God is. If it is otherwise defined, God would not be entirely beautiful. God is entirely beautiful and therefore the definition of beauty. This means our worship, first of all, is to be consistent with who He is. This should be obvious. We do not worship the God of life, with manners and rituals found in a Wiccan handbook. “The beauty of holiness.” If we are to worship in the beauty of holiness, it follows that we are to worship in holiness as well. Holiness first and foremost means separate, other, set apart. It also means moral perfection, but even that at the root means above and other than what is normal. Moral perfection is not achievable as children of Adam. Therefore He who can, namely God, is different, or other, than the rest of us. Our worship is to be holy. Our worship is to be set apart, different, other, above what is normal to us and our culture. This is why we do not (should not) sing Beatles’ songs in Worship. This is why worship does not consist of reading portions of Moby Dick. Worship is to be holy, it is to be different than what we do elsewhere. It is also to be in the *Beauty* of holiness, meaning as *God* defines it, not as we do. So why do we care about what the world says? This temptation to be sensitive to the world’s opinions stems from the idea that Sunday Worship is prime time for evangelism. The primary purpose of worship is to proclaim the gospel to the nations. But that is not the primary purpose of worship. That is what we do Monday through Saturday. On Sunday we come and are fed as the people of God. It is family time. Thus we should not be concerned with gearing the service toward unbelievers. Besides, the essence of worship is going to be foreign to them, no matter how much we dumb it down, unless the Spirit gives them a new set of eyes. The standards the world holds are consistent with their worldview, consistent with their foundation of life, namely, suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. As Christians we have been given new hearts and new eyes to see the truth of Christ presented in the Scriptures. Here is where we discover God for who He is. In this discovery we begin to recognize His attributes throughout nature, and realize that Creation reflects its Creator. Here, through the natural and special revelation of the Spirit, we discover who God is, what He is like, how He thinks, as much as He has revealed to us. Here are our standards for life and worship. If God is Beauty, and our worship is to be beautiful, defined by who God is, then our worship needs to rest on the foundation of what is revealed to us about who He is, not in the latest issue of Rolling Stone Magazine.

We were created in the Garden to be a priesthood, to minister to all creation, and in turn serve God in obedience and thanksgiving. We were recreated in the Garden City of the New Jerusalem, the Church, to be a royal priesthood, ministering to all creation, proclaiming the Gospel of our Lord, to all nations, and in turn serve (worship) God in obedience and thanksgiving. We were created in the image of God. We are recreated in the image of Christ. We are given the Spirit to grow us, mature us, give strength and ability to obey, and comfort us at all times. It is the Spirit who is at work in us, focusing our eyes on Christ, teaching us that through Him we can approach the Father. But it is through Him, and therefore on His terms. We do not approach with strange fire, or with any sense of entitlement, expecting a comfortable experience, one perfectly suited to our needs. We come on holy ground, removing our sandals, and bowing our heads, for the one we approach is Holy. We come in fear and trembling, for we come before the One who is seated in the temple, high and lifted up. And His train fills the temple.

“Is He dangerous?” I asked. My pursed lips quivered, but not from the pain of fire.

“O yes, quite dangerous,” said the Seraph, still holding the burning coal plucked from the alter. “But He is good.”

## *Back to Scripture*

We cannot approach “as we are” and live. We need to be re-created in the image of Christ, and be given new clothes in order to stand before a thrice holy God (Zech 3). I want to throw out some suggestions as to how to worship seriously, with reverence and awe, fear and trembling, and at the very core, real, meaty joy. Worship is at the heart joyful. But not a modern sense of joy, that is synonymous with a happy-clappy idiocy that doesn’t understand the world we live in. I’m talking about real joy, the joy that we defend in the midst of harsh persecution, and the joy we see in all sufferings and trials, the joy that produces steadfastness, and hope. This type of joy is not sentimental, it is not unrealistic, and it is certainly not frivolous. Like glory, it has weight. It is heavy and substantial. It is life altering.

A joyous worship, a joyous sacrifice of praise, sees all things as a gift from the hand of a loving God. Every minute of every day we are receiving from the hand of God. Our response in every such moment, needs to be gratitude. Even more so, gratitude must define our weekly ascension to the courts of heaven, where God meets with us. He visits us in a different way than through the course of the other six days. At the beginning of the week, He comes with a purpose to renew His covenant with us, to remind us that He is our God, and we are His people. He comes to *enact* on us, to change us. He does this (as pictured in the Old Testament sacrificial system) in three parts. He breaks us down, cutting us, and opening our hearts bare to Him. He then builds us back together, restructuring our hearts, and soothing our wounds with His Word. Finally He feeds us, nourishing our souls, fitting us for ministry, and equipping us for war; war with the flesh, war with the world. Our response at each point is one of gratitude. This is our hope and joy, that God Himself does this to us. We are not strong enough to bare our sin to a Holy God in our own strength. We have not the ability to turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. And we dare not come before the Bridegroom, ready for the wedding feast, in clothes of our own making. But here is the very essence of life, confessing our sin before the Father, being sanctified by the Word, and nourished, sacramentally by Holy Spirit. The gospel is this: the Father, Son, and Spirit give this to us as gift. How can we not but give thanks?

To reiterate thoughts from last time, giving thanks must mean obedience. How can disobedience imply gratitude? We must approach the throne of God obediently. This means doing worship His way. What is His way, you ask? The first 39 books of the Bible go into great detail as to the nature of God, what He likes, what He doesn’t like, how He is to be approached, and how He is not to be approached. And if we really believe that God is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow, we cannot dismiss the Old Testament as simply good, fun reading in between serious devotions in the New Testament. We take the whole Word of God as just that, the Whole Word. Modern Christians are often ashamed of the Old Testament because of all the violence toward minorities, strange temple behavior, and weird names from thousands of years ago. Just give me Jesus, they say. News flash folks: Jesus was Jesus even back then, in the “irrelevant” pages of Scripture. All this is to say that we find much instruction as to how God wants to be worshipped, how He desires to be approached, in the Old Testament.

With that in mind, let’s look at Leviticus. Leviticus was written, as the title implies, as a rule book for the Levites, the nation’s priesthood. Peter says, under the inspiration of the Spirit, that we, as Christians, are a royal priesthood. So it becomes more apparent that Leviticus was written for us, Christ’s priests. Leviticus 9:1-4, 22-24 reads:

On the eighth day Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel, and he said to Aaron, “Take for yourself a bull calf for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering, both without blemish, and offer them before the Lord. And say to the people of Israel, ‘Take a male goat for a sin offering, and a calf and a lamb, both a year old without blemish, for a burnt offering, and an ox and a ram for peace offerings, to sacrifice before the Lord, and a grain offering mixed with oil, for today the Lord will appear to you.’”

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

The order of worship we see in both texts (the middle portion is a description of Aaron actually doing it) is the same: Sin offering, Burnt offering, Peace offering. The sin offering was an act of confession, and absolution. The priest took hold of the animal, symbolizing a transfer of guilt and the atonement it would make, and killed it, symbolizing the death of sin. The animal would then be burned and the smoke would ascend to God, who would receive it as sufficient atonement for the worshipper's sin, and therefore enact forgiveness. "And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven" (Lev 4:35). The sin offering could be and was then eaten, symbolizing an absolution, the worshipper once again being accepted before the eyes of God (Lev 6:24-26). This posture of eating is a posture of gratitude. We receive food (forgiveness), and therefore eat (give thanks). Ungrateful eating is presumptuous and turns the best of foods into ash inside our mouths.

The burnt offering is a mistranslation. The meaning of the Hebrew word, translated as burnt, is really ascension. This is an ascension offering. Burnt is redundant, as most offerings are burnt. What makes this offering different from the others is that the whole animal is burnt, and offered in smoke to the Lord. This symbolizes, especially in coming after the sin offering, the worshipper offering all of himself to the Lord's service. We recognize that we are not our own, but belong to God, wholly. Therefore we offer ourselves entirely on the altar of living sacrifices, cut up by His Word, transformed by the fire of the Spirit from one state of glory to the next (flesh and blood to smoke), and enabled to ascend as a pleasing aroma, sacrifices of a broken spirit.

The peace offering was an offering of thanksgiving (or for a vow/freewill offering which is another form of gratitude; Lev 7:11-18). Like the Sin offering, it was to be eaten. The worshipper would bring loaves of unleavened bread with the animal that was to be sacrificed. Only in the peace offering was bread and blood combined. Bread was eaten and blood was poured out, together as one offering and as one act of thanksgiving. In this act of peace, God invites the worshipper to dine with Him. God nourishes His people and communes with them. The worshipper eats with God. This is different from the sin offering in that it is a succession. Man offers sacrifice, God eats, is pleased, forgives, and then the worshipper receives and eats. Here with the peace offering, man eats bread as God eats the sacrifice. They dine at a common table.

God throughout Scripture reveals Himself as Trinity, and does so clearly here. The sin offering is performed for and by the Father. We make atonement with the Father, and He then grants us forgiveness, and restores us to life. The ascension offering symbolizes the work of the Son. In Christ we are dressed and made acceptable to approach the throne as a pleasing aroma. Through the Living Word, we are cut up and transformed from one level of Glory to the next. In the peace offering the Spirit draws us to God, allowing us to dine at His table, filling the very distance that separate creature from Creator. Obviously this is not to say that all three persons are not at work in all three aspects, but God reveals Himself to us in these ways, pedagogically, teaching us who He is.

It is interesting, and very cautionary, that the story of Nadab and Abihu comes directly after the portions of Leviticus 9 quoted above. The moral? God tells Aaron through Moses, exactly how He wants to be worshipped. Aaron obeys, and they beheld the glory of the Lord accepting their offerings in the fire. Immediately after this, it is recorded that Nadab and Abihu offered strange (unauthorized) fire on the altar, *with the intention of worshipping the Lord*, it must be remembered. Their intentions didn't hold much meaning in the final judgment. They then beheld the glory of the Lord consume them, bringing judgment on them for their disobedience. You would think that with examples like this we would learn to not be so flippant with how we approach the throne.

How does this all give us practical tools with which to define and design our worship services? The first thing to do is actually read the texts. Study them, imbibe them, and learn to speak Scripturally about all of Scripture. Then we pull out principles. Obviously, Hebrews says we are no longer to offer actual animal sacrifices anymore. But it is equally clear that we are still a sacrificial people, offering sacrifices of praise, and are ourselves living sacrifices. So how do we define sacrifice? How does God define sacrifice? This is why we go to Leviticus. I am indebted to people like James B Jordan, and Peter Leithart for their work in this area. They have dug and we students have been able to enjoy the fruit of their labor. The principles that we have talked about above, with regard to each sacrifice, fall out into five points that help us when it comes to our own modern day service. First, we are **Called**. God calls us to enter into His presence. He calls us to come before Him with thanksgiving and praise. He calls us to Himself. We cannot come of our own accord. Second, we enter a season of **Confession**. This correlates with the sin offering. We come before a holy God, and the first thing we do is remove our shoes. God is Holy, and we are not. We come acknowledging this, and asking for forgiveness. In response to repentance, God grants forgiveness, and we receive absolution. Next we are **Consecrated**. This correlates with the ascension offering. We are made holy and fit for the service of God. We receive His Word, both read and preached. The Word refashions us, restores us, and renews us, equipping us for service in the Kingdom. Following the tearing down, and the building up, we enter into **Communion**. This correlates with the peace offering. Here we dine at the table of the Lord, and receive nourishment and strength. We feed on Christ, and through the Spirit, dine with the Father. After being equipped and nourished, we are **Commissioned** to enter the world, fulfilling our calling to "Go and make disciples of all the nations."

Here we have an outline from Scripture, from God's own handbook on worship, no less, outlining a progression. We are called, we confess, we are consecrated, we commune, and we are commissioned. This is high drama, full of rising action, climax, and resolution. It is a progression from unsettled fear and trembling, to rest. We come as sinners, we leave as saints. It sounds trite, but that is what is happening. We come in need of cleansing, and leave refreshed and renewed. This is not to say that we are not still sinners when we leave. Or even to say that we are not perfectly accepted in Christ before we come. We are. But God is into picturing reality in actions. The worshipper was alive before he presented his animal sacrifice, a picture of God's grace. And he certainly didn't leave the sacrifice free from sin. Same with today. These dramatic pictures are here to involve us in the truth of what God is doing. He wants us not only to know it with specific head knowledge, but to smell it, to see it, to act it, to hear it, and to taste it. On Sunday mornings, God is drawing us into His presence and renewing before our very eyes the covenant He made thousands of years ago, that He will be our God, and we will be His people. That covenant has gone unbroken since Abraham. In Christ, we are the seed of Abraham, and that covenant is a covenant we cannot break. Abraham had no part in it. He was as asleep as Adam, when Eve was taken out of his side. God brings this to us each week, to remind us, to cause us to partake in it, to find joy in it. But not only does He do this to remind us. This is His chosen means of grace. This is how He wants to do it. It's not our deal to play around with. We don't have the freedom to move it to Saturdays, so we can Sundays off. Nor is it ours to skip if we feel going to the beach is more important. This is our life. This is where God meets with us. He could have chosen any number of ways to commune with His people. But He didn't. He gave us this. This is His day, given for our good. It would behoove us to pay attention.

#### *How it all Plays Out*

Taking a deeper practical look at worship, as seen through the eyes of Leviticus 9, we find a pattern that occurs throughout the Old Testament. It is a pattern of Initiation and Response. God initiates, and we respond. The pattern of worship begins with God **Calling** us to His presence. We then respond with **Confessing** our sins, prostrating our broken souls before the Holy One. God again initiates then with **Consecrating** us by means of His Word. We respond to His Word by **Communing** with Him. He then **Commissions** us to go out into the world, making disciples. We respond by doing so, with His blessing. This is the broad outline to the Drama of God, a High Play by means of which He nourishes and completes His bride, perfecting her, and preparing her for the

final wedding day. I want to put forward some practical ideas regarding how this actually would look in the context of our modern day service of worship. By no means do I put these forward with the understanding that this is the definitive, and only correct way to plan a service. In no way do I mean to be judgmental of other ways. These are simply personal thoughts and are very much biased by personal tastes. That disclaimer aside, I do think that these suggestions could be helpful, if done in a loving, gracious manner, for the church body desiring a more mature, rich, and meaningful service. Therefore I will argue for them, and seek to show their attentiveness to Scripture, hopefully shedding light on what it means to worship the way God intended.

## **The Call**

It begins with God initiating the interaction. We cannot come to Him on our own merit, our own terms, our own anything. The only means by which we can approach the Father is through the Son (John 14.6). It is only in Christ that we have the ability to stand before the throne of holiness. It is only in Christ that we can know Him at all. Christ is the living Word of God, Spoken for our good, and for our Reconciliation. Therefore when He calls us, it is only through Christ, and because of Christ, that we have life and breath to respond with. This means when we respond to the Call of God, we come not on our terms, not on our timetable. We cannot simply make room for it amidst a schedule of things to do. This act of responding to God represents the single biggest, eternal component of your life: your status as a child of God. How do we then respond? Here are some thoughts.

Dress. How we dress speaks to the world and informs them of our priorities. When we wear pajamas, we are telling everyone we are going to bed. When we wear hiking boots and long pants, we are communicating our recreational destination. Not only do we communicate where we are going, we also tell people how important it is to us. If we show up at a funeral in flip flops and shorts, we are telling people how much we honor and respect the deceased. Our attire communicates much about our priorities and what we hold dear than we like to admit. If the worship of God holds any weight in our lives, should it not be reflected in how we dress for it? Obviously there is a major discussion regarding cultural relativity and appropriateness. In every culture however, there are levels of formality when it comes to clothing. It is simply how God made us tick. Understanding where those lines are drawn in our specific context is part of how we prepare ourselves for responding to the Call of God. Were the President of the United States to send us an invitation to come to the Oval Office, we would prepare long and hard with our appearance, before stepping foot inside the White House. But do we do the same when the Creator God of the entire Universe has called us to His presence? Or has our “familiarity” with Sunday Mornings bred contempt?

Reverence and Awe. The writer to the Hebrews commands us to come before the Lord, the King of an unshakeable kingdom, and worship in reverence and awe (12:28). The first part of the verse tells us to be grateful that we have received this kingdom. We do this because our God is a consuming fire. A consuming fire is not something that can be understood as trivial, or common. Moses beheld the consuming fire in the bush, and was consumed with fear and wonder. In obedience he removed his sandals, understanding that where the fire was, was now Holy. God Almighty, Creator of the Universe and everything in it, has called us to Himself, has called us to the Burning Bush, and bids us remove our sandals, for we approach Holy Ground. How do we approach the service on Sunday Mornings? With solemnity and understanding of what we are doing? Or does our familiarity perhaps breed a certain nonchalance that robs the worship of the Holy one of its full depth and life. If we come in a cavalier manner, we do not understand the nature of grace, the nature of the call. The only response to grace is gratitude. Anything else is simply presumption. But we have received an unshakeable kingdom. Does that resonate at all with us? What else can one be but grateful? Here we have the rock of Christ, peace and joy in its richest, fullest incarnation, and we take it for granted. This only testifies to the patience of our Father. Reverence and awe do not mean dour and grim, and fear and trembling do not mean panic and wailing. It is an attitude of honor, and respect, and gratitude that is focused on the reality of what is happening. We, according to Hebrews 12 have now ascended into the heavenly realms, and worship in the presence of the

Father, who is a consuming fire. And we can only come on the good name of another, by the power of a third. We have no role to play in coming. We have nothing to offer, except that which has already been given to us. And to come, offering our gifts of praise and prayers, in a frivolous and unfocused, unconcerned, and unprepared manner, is to spit in the eye of God. Do we honor Him as God? Do we give Him thanks? In speech? In actions? In thoughts? In motives? We have much to confess.

The Call to Worship. The actual call to worship is an important part of the service. It informs the congregation that it is now, at this moment that we are leaving behind our earthly cares and contexts, and coming as one body, one bride, through the Spirit, on the good name of Christ, coming before the Father, coming to worship, and be fed. The worship of God is a serious, life sustaining ritual we perform every week. For those of us who have grown up in the Church, we know how funny it feels to miss church on Sunday morning. We feel weird, and the week doesn't feel the same. It is because we have gone seven days without participating in the particular service of our God, ascending to His courts. This is what is initiated in the Call to Worship. The pastor calls us together, and declares that we are now ascended in Spirit and truth. Here a couple practical thoughts on this point.

Announcements are often a necessity, even though sometimes awkward and unwieldy in the context of communal worship. It is not inappropriate at all to give announcements, but the transition is where it gets sticky. One minute we are thinking about the potluck next Wednesday and what we need to bring, or remembering that baby shower and that you forgot to buy a gift, and then suddenly the pastor is reading a Psalm, having already begun, leaving you in the dust. Perhaps if there were an interlude, a Selah, for meditation and preparation. This could be accomplished by quartet singing one of the hymns that will be sung in the service, while the congregations prepares. Mind you, this is not a performance. It is an aid in worship. If not a quartet, an instrumental interlude is more than adequate. Giving the congregation that has now gathered, and has quieted down, time to refocus on what they are about to do. It is difficult to come in with an attitude of reverence and awe, with the powdered sugar left over from the doughnut that was on the patio, still clinging to your lips, with hands still sticky from the OJ that finished it off. If the congregation comes from pre-service fellowship times (which is another discussion altogether) straight into the worship of God, it will be very hard for them to transition, and come before the Lord with fear. Therefore a simply Selah, giving time between announcements and the Call for people to grasp what they are about to do, together as one body.

The call to worship should be distinct and clear. "Let us worship the Triune God." It is a declarative statement (and imperative, of sorts) calling us to His presence. At this time it is appropriate for the congregation to stand, symbolizing the act of ascension, as well as the communal aspect of ascending together. We are one body, not simply a collection of individuals. We are a corporate body, a plural made into a singular. When God addresses us, He addresses us as His people. He addresses us as a body, *the* body, the Body and Bride of Christ. Psalm 95 bids us, "Come, let us worship the Lord." We are commanded in Scripture to come, and the pastor repeats this command, bidding us come. We have been called. Come. Let us worship the Lord. The silence of meditation before this call, make the call more pronounced, communicating in the stark declaration, that what we are about to do is not only serious and meaningful, it carries weight. What we do is grace. Dangerous and consuming grace.

Following the call should be a brief description of what we are doing, why we do it, and on what basis we are doing this. Again this is declarative. It is happening. The pastor is leading us, and does so as the mouth piece of God. He leads, and we respond. This is not a casual performance that we sit back and watch. The congregation is an active part of the service, for we all have come to worship, and we are on stage, not in the audience. Using Scripture at this point is most appropriate. Responsively reading a Psalm, like Psalm 95, which again invites to "Come, let us worship the Lord, let us kneel before the Lord our maker," has the effect of engaging the people, and drawing the congregation into the act and drama of worship. The readings should be quick and snappy, not

allowed to drag and mumble. When a group of people try to read something at the same time, at a slow pace, they will all go at different speeds, trying to accommodate for one another, and it will get slower and slower, until the effect of the antiphonal call and response is lost. But when short segments (following the natural parallelism of the Psalms' poetic structure) are read with confidence and strength, the responsorial nature is kept intact, and the Psalm is read as a whole piece, by caller and congregation, rather than verse by verse which tends to lose the rhythm and flow of the text.

After reading together the Word of God, we respond with praise and thanksgiving. A doxological hymn would fit well here. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" is cried aloud together, reminding us who has spoken. As I have said before, the service we render to our God is filled with the pattern of initiation and response. God initiates, we respond. Do not respond is to show ingratitude. In reading the Word, God speaks to us, and we hear His voice in the Psalm. We in turn respond with words of our own, words that give voice to our utter dependence and gratitude. This completes our ascension, our song joining the song of the seraphim, praising God who indeed is Holy.

### **Confession**

When anyone in Scripture encounters God, is brought into His presence, or has a vision of the Most High, the immediate response is one of complete recognition of sin. Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips." He beholds the holiness of God, and cannot stand in His presence. We too, ascend and stand before the Lord God, and are naked before Him. We have been called, but as we enter the house, we must be washed. We do so in confession of our sins. Psalm 95 again, "Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker." Our immediate posture upon entering the throne room must be one of prostration. We come and lay our hearts and souls bare before Him, acknowledging His hatred of our sins, confessing them, and grabbing hold of the blood of Christ. I am a fan of corporate confessions, because they again draw attention to the fact that we are a body, and come as such. But there is also a place for individual confession, and time should be given for it. Scripture again is used to confirm our status as sinners and teaching us how to repent. Psalm 51 is a perfect example of what a broken and contrite heart looks like, and we would do well to drink deeply of texts like these. As important as it is to confess our sins, corporately and individually, so it is also important to receive a statement of absolution. In this the pastor speaks the words of God, not finding any power to forgive sins in himself, but simply proclaiming the truth of what God has done. After confession, the pastor might say something to the effect of, "As a minister of the Word of God, having confessed yours sin honestly and before God and one another, I declare unto you, that your sins are forgiven in Jesus Christ." To this the congregation gives their "Amen!" through a hymn/Psalm of thanksgiving, rejoicing in the fact that we have been made clean.

Of course in participating in a confession like this, I am not suggesting our sins were not forgiven before we confessed them, or before the minister says so. There is no magic in the act of our speaking, only in the act of God speaking. And that happened before time began. However, we follow a pattern like this for two reasons. The first is that, to my understanding, Scripture lays out this pattern in Old Testament Sacrificial practices, which we have already discussed. But secondly, God, in worship, is renewing His covenant with us. He is reminding us of who we are, where we came from, who He is, where He is taking us, how we get there, and what we are supposed to be busy with on the way. Worship is not just a time of superficial praise that leaves us with a good feeling. It is participation in God's nature, it is being brought into the Triune dance, teaching us, shaping us, molding us, preparing us, and equipping us for taking that Triune dance of life into the world, and making disciples. In this way worship becomes a dialogue, constructed to remind us of every stage, lest we become proud in our status as children, chosen though we may be. We must always confess our sins, and we must

always be reminded of our forgiveness. Our worship is full of symbols and acts and rituals that point and lead us to life. We participate in the drama, with all its plot developments, and are nourished.

Following a confession of our sins, it is right and fitting that we confess our faith. The use of one of the creeds of Christendom (e.g. the Nicene Creed) is appropriate as it unifies us with a much broader body of believers than simply the ones in our physical and temporal proximity. I am also a fan of using a catechism to help instruct the congregation concerning our faith. Catechisms such as the Heidelberg, for example, lead the believer through the various points of the faith, strengthening their understanding of what they believe. Again, doing this corporately builds unity, and binds the congregation together as a whole, treating them as one family, which they are. Again, a hymn/Psalm of response allows the congregation to say "Amen!" to what they believe and confess.

### **Consecration**

We have come to the house, and have knocked on the door. We have entered and have been washed. We are next invited to come and sit at the feet of the master of the house, and hear His Word. This corresponds with the Ascension offering (mistranslated as whole burnt offering). You will remember that in the ascension offering, the entire animal was offered, and was completely burned, transforming the animal into ascending smoke, and pleasing aromas. Likewise, we are completely cut up by the Word, and transformed by the work of the Spirit into a pleasing aroma. The Word of God exposes our weakness, our dependence on Christ, and our inability to live outside the Spirit. We come to the Word to hear our Father speak to us. It follows then to have a time of Scripture readings. More lengthy portions are appropriate as you are trying to communicate the Word with some Continuity. Historically there has been an Old Testament Reading, an Epistle Reading, and a Gospel Reading. Giving prominence to each, allowing each section to teach us something different about who God is. The purpose of the three texts was/is to show that God is the same throughout Scripture. God is Father, Son, and Spirit, from Genesis through Revelation. He has not changed. Therefore reading from all parts of the Word every week, keeps us fresh with whole picture of who God is, as He has revealed Himself through the entirety of Scripture, not just certain sections. It is right that the reader ask the congregation to stand for the reading of the Word. We honor the Word and hold a high view of the Word, for it is the Word of God. Standing at attention does two things. It shows honor and respect for the high nature of the Word. Second, it teaches us to pay attention. When we stand, as opposed to sitting, it is harder to lose focus, for we are at attention. Hearing the Word is one of the most important aspects of this service of Worship. Here is life. In response we sing our amen to what God has spoken in and through His living Word.

Having sat at the feet of the Master of the house, and having listened to His Word, we come before Him and lift up our hearts in response. We have been cut open by His Word, which is sharper than any two edged sword, and have ascended into the heavenlies as a pleasing aroma. We are wholly offered up, and as such we bring to Him our whole selves, worries and concerns and praises and all. He is our Father, and tells us to approach His throne. We have already confessed our sins. He has responded with forgiveness. We have confessed our faith, and He has responded with the assurance of His word, a prophetic word that is 'more sure' than anything we have ever experienced. Have received such reassurance, we come with our needs, and cast them in His hand. He takes them, bears our burdens, and gives us peace. We come trusting and with open hearts. In such a prayer, usually called a pastoral prayer, we lift up the needs of the local congregation, the local community, and beyond. We leave nothing hidden; we bring it all to the throne. We are wholly offered, and completely transformed. This means our entire selves, not just our Sunday best. The congregation again sings their amen in a psalm/hymn of thanksgiving, expressing their gratitude that God has heard their pleas.

God initiates again, and speaks to us through the pastor and the proclamation of the particular word. A sermon in which the Word of God is faithfully preached, and applied, lies at the heart of the consecration section of Worship. It is where the specific needs of the congregation are met and the specific weaknesses of the congregation are attended to. At this point the local preacher of the Word, preaches to his specific local people. They are to hear what they need to hear. This varies from church to church, for the Spirit brings us along at different stages and at different times. But the pastor is equipped to know his flock, and to faithfully preach the Word to his flock. This is his calling, and his ministry, to know and love his flock with understanding.

We, in response, lift up the remainder of our lives in our tithes. We have lifted up our sins, our faith, our needs, and now our livelihoods, acknowledging that all belongs to the Lord. All of us, all of our belongings, everything is gift. We receive the gift with joy and thanksgiving, but honor the giver of gifts with the first fruits. The best of the crop we offer back unto the Lord. As the offering is being taken, a Psalm/hymn of thanksgiving again will direct the hearts and minds of the congregation toward the meaning of the offertory. It is not something we do in order to get. We do because we have received. We have received life and the Word and all things from His hand, and in response we offer up our best, as the Lord has commanded.

## **Communion**

Following the pattern of call and response, God again calls us out of the living room, and into the dining room. We come now having been called, cleansed and consecrated, ready to dine with our Lord, at His table. This is the climax of the entire service. It is at this point that we see the fulfillment of God's promise most clearly: "I will be their God, and they will be my people." Up to this point, we have been washed and prepared and taught and instructed. It has primarily been a vertical relationship with the Triune God. It is at this point, at the Eucharistic Table, the Table of thanksgiving, that engage God on a horizontal level. We have passed from unclean, to clean to holy, and have now been found acceptable in Christ. As holy creatures we have been granted access into the Most Holy Place. We partake of Christ, and feed on Him. His body, broken for us; His blood, poured out for us. In Him we find life, and in partaking in His meal, we find the spiritual nourishment needed to trust and obey.

A quick note about the nature of the Communion Service. As humans we have a tendency to focus on ourselves far too much. We are tempted to take every opportunity to look inside, even with the best intentions. The table is one place where this should not happen, but does regularly. The Lord's table is a public table, meaning there are more people there than just you and Jesus. It is not a private, prayer closet event. Every Sunday we publically declare the death of Christ, together as a body. It is the culmination of our public declaration of faith. It is true that Paul tells us to examine ourselves before partaking. But this has already happened in the confession of sin. We have already been cleansed by the blood of forgiveness. We have already been purified by the washing of the Word. We come now to the table in peace and in fellowship. It is a time of Thanksgiving, not of inward contrition. This brings up another point. Our attitude and demeanor during Communion should not be one of dourness or of mourning. It is true that Christ commanded us to do this in remembrance of Him. But we do not Honor the host by thinking about Him in the grave. Our Host is before us. Our Host is serving us. He did not die, and remain as such. He died yes, but died in order to be raised again. And His death, which we proclaim, is not one of hopelessness, or one of gloom. His death is the death of death. His death, is our life. I believe it is dishonoring the death of Christ to treat His Table as if we were attending a funeral. We are a people of life, who are born again into life, taken out of death, out of the kingdom of death, and given life, and placed in a kingdom of life! This is incredible. And now we sit *with God! And partake of His Son, our Lord!* How can we sit back and simply look inward at who we are, and how much we don't deserve this. That is not the point of the table. Of course we don't deserve this, we don't deserve any of it. But God gives it to us anyway. It is gift. It is *the* gift. The table symbolizes the epitome of what it means to be a child of God. To be granted a seat at His table. To enter

into a horizontal relationship with the God of the universe. *This is gospel*. This is incredible, unbelievable, overflowing, abundant gift. This is God with us: Immanuel. This is why I feel it is important to sing together as a congregation while the elements are being passed out. The bread signifies His broken body, so a song of meditation on the sacrifice is appropriate. But the wine signifies the New Covenant that has been ratified by His blood. This requires a song of victory, of joy and jubilation. There is therefore now no condemnation in Christ Jesus. It is this truth that we declare in the New Covenant. This truth should be the inspiration of our faculties, giving life to our voices as we praise God, truly from whom all blessings flow.

In response we give all the glory to God for all that He has done. "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen."

### **Commission**

We have reached the climax of our service. We have been brought in out of the darkness. We have been washed, and clothed in robes of marvelous light. We have been ushered to the Table where we have declared to everyone passing by that we are children of the King. We eat and drink the body of Christ in public proclamation of the grace that resides in the death of death, the death that leads to life. We have participated in this service, as God has renewed His covenant with us, again reminding us of His goodness, and our call to work out our salvation, loving one another, making disciples and teaching all that we have been commanded. We have been cleansed, consecrated and nourished. We are not fit to be sent into the world to live lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called. We cannot do this in our own strength, and the Spirit of Christ accompanies us throughout the week. Monday through Saturday we live out what God works in, and on Sunday we gather for family time. But as we leave we are exhorted to go and do as we have been shown, and through the pastor, God gives His final blessing before we go. It is the oil anointing our heads, fitting us for service throughout the week. It is a benediction placed on our heads. Throughout Scripture the blessing was given by the father placing his hand on the head or the shoulders of the son. Likewise, here the pastor should raise his hands in blessing, as we receive it on our heads. We are sons and daughters blessed with an inheritance, an inheritance of life in Christ. The pastor, our shepherd, as a minister of God places his hand on our heads and blesses us, as Isaac blessed Jacob, and as Jacob blessed Manasseh and Ephraim. With this final blessing we are sent out to be salt and light, taking with us the life and living the gospel.

### *Final Thoughts*

We are the City of God, a royal priesthood, commissioned by God to bring the gospel to the four corners of the earth. We start with the four corners of our neighborhood. Our life Monday through Saturday will be an exact reflection of where our heart is on Sunday. If we respond to God in all humility, as He calls, cleanses, consecrates, communes with, and commissions us, our lives will not be able to do anything but reflect throughout the week the grace we have been shown. That in turn will guide our actions as we give grace to those around. From this foundation, we go and care for widows and orphans, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give shelter to the homeless, and visit the sick and imprisoned. From this point we show love to the unlovely, and care for the uncared for. Here we find effective apologetics: lives overflowing with the goodness of the gospel. But it starts with right and rich worship. Worship that is done Gods way. Worship that seeks to glorify Christ in maturity and in growth. Worship that takes us out of our comfort zone, and forces us to reckon with a Holy God. A God who does not take lightly well-intentioned disobedience, or good-hearted self service. If we are to grow in worship of God, we need to take a hard look at everything we do, and compare it with Scripture. In which camp to we fall? Are we with Aaron, or with Nadab and Abihu?

In summary, here is the order of service I developed above. In no way am I saying this order of service is infallible, or the only way to do things. By no means. I believe the outline is Scriptural (Call, Confession, etc.). But the fleshing out of that outline is dependent on local context and gifts of the specific Church. Each body of elders must decide together how they are to give substance to the outline, according to the convictions and consciences of the particular board. But here are my thoughts according to what was developed above.

### **Lords Day Service**

Announcements

Meditation

Call to Worship

Exhortation

Responsive Reading

Psalm/Hymn of Praise

Psalm of Confession

Corporate Confession of Sin

Absolution

Confession of Faith

Catechism Questions

Psalm/Hymn of Thanksgiving

Old Testament Reading

Gospel Reading

Epistle Reading

Psalm/Hymn of Thanksgiving

Pastoral Prayer

Psalm/Hymn of Thanksgiving

Preaching of the Particular Word

Offertory with Psalm/Hymn

Communion

Song of Meditation for Bread

Song of Victory for Wine

Gloria Patri

Final Exhortation

Benediction

May we seek to glorify God in all we do, and especially in our act of Worship. May we seek to be nourished and renewed by Him who is faithful to do that which He has promised, and is faithful to finish what He has begun in us. Praise Him for His patience with us, and His commitment to see us conformed to the image of His Son. May we have the humility to change what needs to be changed in our pursuit of obedience, and may we learn to trust God for the repercussions. Obedience to His Word comes first, our own tastes and comfort levels come after. May God bless our desires to be faithful to His Word and grant us maturity in how we approach His throne. May we never take for granted His grace, but always see all things as gift. Gift that forgives. Gift that gives life.