

“Joining the Conversation”

Romans 11:33-12:3 • Psalm 32

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 5, 2024

Last weekend some of the kids in our church were performing in a play at their school and I had the privilege of attending. They all did a great job and it was fun to watch. But it also got me thinking. When you go see a play or a concert, there are certain “rules.” Basically, you are expected to sit quietly so that you don’t disturb the actors and musicians, but also so you don’t disturb the other people who are there to enjoy the performance.

The problem is that I think we often bring that same thinking with us to worship. We feel like we are attending a performance. Maybe because the physical setting of worship seems like a theater. In fact, some churches are intentionally designed as a theater. So you come in and feel like part of the audience, watching what is happening up on the “stage.”

But that’s not biblical worship. When we come to worship, all of us are part of the drama that is unfolding. If you have spent a lot of time in Reformed churches, like Presbyterian, you may not think about the format of our worship service. It just seems normal to you. But if you have attended worship in some of the other Christian traditions, you might be wondering why we do things the way we do. That’s what I want us to look at this morning.

The first thing I want you to see today about biblical worship is what we’ll call the *Who* of worship. Christian worship has only one purpose: to glorify God! Jesus Christ is both the *subject* of worship and the *object* of our worship. When we come to worship, we are not only here to learn *about* Jesus, we are also here to praise Him for what he has done for us on the cross.

The second thing I want us to see today is the *why* of worship. You and I were created to worship God. The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which children were required to memorize in order to join the church, asks, “What is the chief end of man?” In other words, what is your purpose in life? The answer is, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and

to enjoy him forever.” We have no higher purpose than to worship God.

My third point this morning is the *when* of worship. Worship is not something we do for an hour or so a week. Worship should be a way of life for us. Praising God should be the most important thing in your life. Not that the other things aren’t important – of course they are. But worship should be most important. In 1 Thessalonians 5, the Apostle Paul writes, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

You and I are called to a lifestyle of worship. That means both personal worship in private, which can be at any time and in any place, and it also means coming together to worship as the church. As we heard earlier from Romans, we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Our corporate worship together requires that we each be worshipping “in spirit and in truth.” A.W. Tozer once said, “Practically every great deed done in the church of Christ all the way back to the Apostle Paul, was done by people blazing with the radiant worship of their God.” When a bunch of worshipers come together to worship, it’s like coals on a fire. The more there are, the hotter it is.

So that’s the *who*, the *why* and the *when*. Now we come to the *how* of Reformed worship. Here is what makes us kind of unique. The Reformed understanding of worship is that the elements of the worship service are not worship, they are merely aids to worship. Worship is not following some fixed order of the service or reciting certain words. Remember, worship is centered entirely on Jesus, not on the pastor or the worship leaders or the musicians. The Presbyterian understanding of worship is that together we are coming into the presence of God and engaging in a two-way conversation. God speaks to us through his Word and we respond. This is the basic pattern of our

corporate worship and it should be the basic pattern of each of our lives. As Paul says, we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, discerning God's will for our lives.

The foundational principle is that worship should be conformed to God's Word. We have long believed that God tells us how he desires for us to worship him and so there are some key elements to worship. If you will look at your bulletin for a moment, I would like to point out those key elements as they are incorporated into our service. This is not to say that the way we order our service is the only way or even the best way for every one. One of the great things about the Presbyterian concept of worship is that there is great freedom for churches to order their service in the way that is most meaningful. As we look at these, keep in mind the idea that this is a conversation between God and us.

The first element we find in worship is the Call to Worship at the very beginning. This is always taken from Scripture, usually from the Psalms, which is the prayer book of the Bible. What's important to remember about the Call to Worship is that it is God who is calling us to worship him, inviting us into His presence. "O come, let us sing to the Lord." We then respond with a prayer of invocation, inviting God to be present in our worship.

Another important aspect of Reformed worship is lots of prayer—prayers of confession, of adoration, thanksgiving, and intercession (where we pray for the needs of people). Calvin said that prayer is the way we dig up Christ's riches. Early in the service is the prayer of confession, which we combine with the prayer of invocation. When we confess our sin to God, not only is he faithful to forgive us but we are reminded of *why* we are worshipping. This sets the tone for the whole service. In response to our confession, we hear from God's Word the assurance of our forgiveness. "Believe the good news of the gospel, in Jesus Christ you are forgiven." I hope you're getting a sense of this conversation we have with God in worship.

Maybe the most important emphasis in Reformed worship is the reading and interpreting of the Scriptures and the participation in the Sacraments, which John Calvin called a "visible word." Our worship includes lots of Scripture. It is God speaking to us. Everything in the service is building to hearing from God in his Word. This is how God transforms us by the renewal of our minds as we hear and meditate on His Word.

The last two elements of worship are our responses of praise, which includes singing, and the offering of ourselves to God. The reason we take up a collection in church is not so we can try to get money from people. Rather, as Presbyterians we understand that the giving of our money, as well as our time and talents, is an act of worship.

We see this pattern, this conversation with God in worship, in Psalm 32. In verse 3 David tells of his need to worship God. He says, "when I kept silent, my bones wasted away." Worship is what gave him strength. Verse 5 is his confession. "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity." In response he hears the assurance of forgiveness: "you forgave the iniquity of my sin." David answers back to God in prayer and praise. "Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found...You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble." Then in verse 8, God speaks saying, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go." Finally in verse 11 David responds in praise: "Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart."

So let me end this morning with some suggestions on how to get the most from the worship service. First, remember *who* and *why* we are worshipping by understanding what God has done for you in Jesus. Second, know *when* to worship, making worship a lifestyle, not just a Sunday morning activity. Third, concentrate on *how* you should worship, preparing your heart and mind to enter God's presence. When you come to worship, *expect* to hear God speak to

you. Listen for one thought or idea or even one word that stands out to you. Spend some time the rest of the day contemplating what that thought means for your life. Find some application of God's Word for your daily life. And finally, join the conversation. Participate fully in the service – praying, singing (even if you're a terrible singer), and hearing God's Word.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "As long as you notice, and have to count, the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice." He then said, "The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God." My prayer is that each one of you would experience that kind of worship.

Amen.