

Reformed Worship: The Anatomy of a Worship Service

Lesson 10: The Verdict is Announced

Intro

We learned last week that worship begins when God *calls us to worship*. What happens next? The next thing that happens is God, graciously and lovingly, *puts us in our place*—as debtors to mercy alone—by reminding us of our need to see our sin.

Worship fundamentally entails the proper recognition of *God in His place*, on His throne, as God, Lord, King, and Redeemer; but we can't do that without first recognizing *ourselves in our place*, on the dunghill, on death row, as sinners in need of His grace and mercy.

In this lesson we focus on the *cleansing* aspect of our worship service, which is perhaps the most neglected part of the service in most churches today. Considering there's no way we as sinners can approach God without being cleansed, it's sad that many Protestant churches have abandoned this part of the service. This part is generally made up of 3 components: *the reading of God's law, the confession of sin, and the assurance of pardon*.

What Happened?

- I. Why have so many churches abandoned this aspect of worship?
 - A. "It's too Roman Catholic." —We acknowledge that the minister has no power in and of himself to absolve sin or even to pronounce absolution. The minister stands *as a representative of God*—in the place of God but not in place of God—to make a declaration assuring the confessors of what Scripture teaches regarding God's promise to forgive the sins of the penitent who come to Him through Christ, 1Jn 1.9
 - B. "It's awkward and can make visitors feel uncomfortable." —It's supposed to.
 1. This objection reveals a major issue in the culture of the church: we've capitulated to the felt needs rather than to the real needs of the world. The world feels they need to be comfortable, anonymous, and entertained. By tapping into this, the megachurch movement was born and church attendance grew.
 2. But worship isn't meant to be about our felt needs. It's about God, who knows our real needs, and what He commands we do, in order to have those needs met. And He commands that we meditate on His law and confess our sins to Him, 1Jn 1.8-10; Rom 3.23. We shouldn't be ashamed to include this in our liturgy. *It's one of the high points in the service because it prepares our hearts to receive the one thing needful: God's assurance of our forgiveness and peace with Him.

The Reading of the Law

- I. Why should we read and hear God's law in a worship service?
 - A. For one thing, because it's so great and helpful to us! Ps 19.7-10
 - B. Secondly, because it tells us how to live pleasing to God (WCF 19.6). It's God's rulebook for our lives. Not only the Ten Commandments, but all the precepts and imperatives in the Bible are the rule of life given to us by God, e.g. Gal 5-6; Eph 4-6; Col 3-4; Rom 12-16
 1. And within the context of a covenantal conversation in which God comes to us in love and with grace, the law of God is given to us from the hands of our crucified and resurrected Saviour. Which is to say, it's given, not as a ladder to climb *for* life, but as a rule by which to live out the life we already have in Christ.
 2. God's law comes to us as those who are alive in Christ, who are already justified in Christ, who are already beloved sons of God, and who have the Holy Spirit indwelling us in

order to conform us more and more unto it. We receive the law and strive to obey it *from* life, not *for* life. (cf. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* Sun PM series)

- C. And thirdly, in order to tell us that we *haven't been* living by God's rule. It convinces us that we *can't* please God by our own works, and that if God's being pleased with us requires us to render a *perfect* obedience to His law (100% of the law, 100% of the time, with 100% of the heart!) then we're hopeless and helpless.
1. God's law confronts us with all the ways we've broken covenant during the week and uncovers for us the sinful pollutions of our nature, hearts, and lives.
 2. Thus, we read the law of God to put us in our place. It's an act of submitting to God as Lord over our lives and letting Him call the shots (by His law) and letting Him say what is true of us (that we have sinned).
 3. Reading the law of God in worship is a necessary part of meeting with God because it tells us who He is (as God) and also who we are (as sinners in need of His grace).

Confession of Sin

- I. Following the law's work to expose our sin, charge us with guilt, and confront us with God's holiness, the next step in worship is to confess our sin and guilt to God—after all, *He's* the One against whom we've sinned, and He's *the only One* who can forgive us on His end and assure of it on our end. So confession isn't simply the next *logical* step, it's the *only* next step, Neh 8.5-9; Isa 6.5
 - A. As sinners, we need to confess our sins. And as God, He delights in our confession because He delights in glorifying His Son in forgiving us our sins for His sake, Ps 32; Isa 40.2 (N.B. "double" = double pardon, not double punishment); 1Jn 1.9-2.1
 - B. When we come to God in confession, particularly in worship, we're reminding ourselves of our identity: we are those who have been forgiven, but we are not perfect: we live every day by the grace and mercy of God: we are justified in Christ; but we're also still sinful and in need of Christ's cleansing blood every day: our positional holiness is secure and unalterable; but our daily, practical holiness grows by degrees and will always need work.
 - C. To neglect confession in worship is to risk confusing our positional holiness with our practical holiness, our once-for-all justification and standing with God with our progressive sanctification and growth in God. (cf. *Radical Call to Holiness* by Barrett and Beeke)
 - D. Just as confession and repentance must be part of our daily lives, so it must preeminently be part of our weekly worship, by which we come uniquely into the presence of our holy God and look in the face of His holy law.
- II. Moreover, given the spiritual blessings of confession, to withhold confession in worship is to keep people in bondage (cf. Ps 32.3-5) and to withhold the ground upon which any assurance of pardon from God makes sense (Ps 32.5).
 - A. As worship invariably shapes and forms the way we think about God and ourselves, we need this repeated confrontation with the holiness of God and our own sinfulness. It lays again the foundational understanding without which no one can be saved: we can only come to God as sinners and He will not receive us until we do.

Assurance of Pardon

- I. Following the confession of our sins, which we do in believing dependence upon the work of Christ to cleanse them and the promise of God to forgive them, the Lord graciously assures us of pardon, 1Jn 1.9. The minister doesn't do the forgiving. He only makes the declaration of it in his role as the representative and mouthpiece of God in the service, cf. Num 6.22-27; 2Sam 12.13

- A. It's astounding in worship to hear the law of God condemn us and to be compelled by conviction to confess our sins, only to have God tell us that we have nothing to fear because He loves us still and forgives us again. But that's the gospel, Rom 8.1
- B. What's wonderful about Christian worship is that while it requires we be confronted with sin and it requires we confess our guilt to God, it doesn't leave us there. It reminds us that we are God's sinners, sinners saved by His grace, and therefore sinners whom He delights to forgive. It reminds us of our place in the story: that we're sinners who've been rescued by Christ from the hell we deserve and put into a covenantal relationship with the Father in which we can grow more holy every day by the cycle of repentance and forgiveness. This is who we are. It's our most basic and fundamental identity.
- C. So rather than hiding our sinfulness or neglecting to talk about, Christian worship brings it, each week, to the forefront in order that it might be met, each week, with the over-compensating grace of God in Christ to forgive, heal, and, ultimately, transform.

Law and Gospel

- I. The distinction between the law and the gospel is of utmost importance in understanding Scripture (cf. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* Sun PM series). Confusion here leads either to the ditch of legalism on the left or the ditch of antinomianism on the right.
 - A. One reason why this portion of the liturgy is so important is because it lays out this proper distinction. First, we learn from God's law what's required in order to stand before Him; and we learn, by that, that we can't meet that standard. But then the good news come. We're kept from thinking that God's law can be the means of our salvation when God testifies to the way opened up by His Son's work.
 - B. And this then changes our relationship to the law of God. Once we see that we have a legal standing before God by grace and through Christ, and that the law of God no longer condemns us, then we're sent back to the law as our guide for living a life of gratitude. We now want to make it our aim to please God, not in order to be righteous, by because we've been made righteous by His grace in Christ. We look to the law as those *alive* to it (Rom 6) and no longer *killed* by it (Rom 7) and we delight to strive to *obey* it out of a love for the God of our salvation (Rom 8).

Who would want to neglect this part of worship?