

## **“The Gift of Worship”**

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When we did our surveys here, to find out what we find is meaningful and important, and what we stand for - what the pillars of Westminster church are - there are four, and you see them on the walls. The first one on that list, oddly enough, is that we worship with tradition. In an age when so many people are talking about contemporary worship and entertainment in worship, we have still stood by that premise [that] in fact less than 10 percent of the church wanted to change from traditional worship, in any way, shape or form. And, of that less than 10 percent, many of those were older people, thinking that the younger people wanted it and they [the older people] were being nice. [Laughter.] The younger ones in our survey didn't want it either.

Now we kind of get that feeling, for whatever reason, that this is the way we want to worship, but I know most of us don't know why, other than it was the way we were raised - it makes us feel a sense of wonder and awe. But, I would like to take a few minutes and explain why we worship the way we do, because I have even heard people who worship in a contemporary style, even go so far as to say that we are not being biblical either, because we are too liberal, or our worship style is just too organized, and there is not enough room for the Holy Spirit. So I want to address some of those things, and to explain why we appreciate worship in the traditional style, in which we have it.

First of all, why do we worship at all? This needs to be addressed in our society, because so many people believe that “I'm a Christian, but I don't need to worship. I don't need to go to church. I'm just a Christian, because I believe.”

We worship because God *created* us to worship. God called us to honor God - to worship God - to express our joy and praise. As we said in the prayer earlier, we don't come to worship for our own edification. If you come away from church and you didn't get anything out of it - because Bill was preaching [laughter]. (It would have been funnier if he were here today but he will see the tape.) [Laughter.]

It doesn't matter - your reason for being here. I hope you get something out of it when you come here, but the even greater thing isn't what you are getting, it's what you are giving that makes the difference - you're giving by your being here today. You are giving your honor, your praise and your glory to the one you worship as Almighty, as Omnipotent, as loving, gracious and kind. That is our God.

So if you walk out of here saying, “Boy, I didn't get a thing. I didn't understand a darn thing Scott was saying today,” it doesn't matter. The very act of your being here allows God to smile down on you, for the joy of having honored him with your presence today.

But, I hope you get something.

So we go back in time to the very essence of Scripture. We turn to Ephesians 1:5-6, “*He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good*

*pleasure of his will, and to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us his Beloved.”*

Whenever it talks about praise it talks about worship, because worship is praising God. That is what we are called to do and who we are called to be. We are the ones who praise God.

That goes all the way back to the earliest times in the Old Testament, to the earliest Israelites. When the Israelites were scattered and they would come back in their pilgrimage, they would sing their songs of praise going up to the Temple gates, and they would open the gates only when they heard the people singing their praises. It was like a dilly, dilly moment in the ancient world. [Laughter.] (Some of you got that.) [Laughter.] They would hear the songs of praise and they would know that they had somehow shared the secret password, and they would let them in. If people would come up to the gate and they were not singing, or they were singing something that was not from the Psalms, they were not allowed in the gate, and they could not get to the Temple to find God and the Holy of Holies.

Even at the moment when the arc of the covenant was being carried forth, it was done with singing and praise - which was another word for worship. So, whenever that act of singing happens, praise occurs; God is present and we are worshiping. It is in the very fiber of our being, as people of faith, that we worship.

Now, how do we do that? Why do we do it, and why is it laid out in the worship service the way it is?

It goes back all of the way to the ancient Church, to the Israelite Church. When you go back to the ancient words - all the way back to King David and the gathering of the Priests in the Temple - they would offer prayers of confession, so that the people would be purified, so that they would be allowed to be in the presence of God. Because, they believed - as we believe - that if you were impure, you were not eligible to be part of the Temple, and the only way to be purified - to be pure - was to confess your sins, and then you were present with God, forgiven and restored.

So the Prayer of Confession was given. Then you carried through, and then, there were the Prayers of Intercession - which we have as the Prayers of the People. And, those intercessory prayers were shared around the Temple, praying for those you were worried about - those who were sick, those who were struggling, those who had fallen away from their faith. Whatever your concern was, that was the moment in the Temple that you lifted those up. Then you carried through and all of the other prayers were shared.

By the time we moved to the New Testament - to the earliest Christian church - they took the same model of worship that was done in the Synagogues, after the Temple had been destroyed twice. There was no longer a Temple, so what they built for their worship was the “Synagogue.”

In the Synagogue service, they started with a call to worship, which called God to be present with the people. That is why we do a Call to Worship. Then there were songs, hymns, psalms that were sung of praise, because that is what we do when God is present with us: we praise God - honoring God - thanking God for being with us.

Then we start the Prayer of Confession, as the ancient Temple and Synagogue had done, to purify ourselves so that we can be in the greatest moment = closest to God - as God prepares us. It doesn't mean we are sinless. It simply means that we are preparing ourselves to be in the presence of God.

Now a twist that came in the earliest church, that they didn't have in the Synagogue, was *always* after the Prayer of Confession they had a Declaration of Pardon, because what the Synagogue could not do that the early Christian Church could was talk about a forgiveness of sins - not by sacrificing an animal or by waiting for a Messiah, to free them from the bondage of sin and death; but by the early church we *had* that Messiah - fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Now, every time there is a confession it is to purify the soul; but we are reminded that that purification isn't something *we did*, but it is something *God did* through us - through the second person of the Trinity - in Jesus Christ who purified us through Christ's death and resurrection. We are made whole, not because of what we have done, but what Christ has done for us. That's why, since the earliest times in the Christian Church - from day one - there was a confession and a pardon - pardoning us from our sin.

Then there are the Prayers of the People. This is the moment in which the Church would stop and they would say, "We are in need of your help, your healing, your restoration," and that was the moment at which all the people could usher in all of their worries, their cares - but they always did it in community. Notice that the Jewish people, from which they are our ancestors, did not believe in worshipping alone. Even Jesus who talked about, "*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them.*" I have heard so many bad sermons about that passage. It doesn't mean that, "Hey, we can get by with only two or three." What Jesus meant by that was, you *cannot* worship alone. You have to have at least two or three - and hopefully more - in order to be worshipers of the Triune God. So, those prayers come with a communal meaning, of which all of us are reaching out to one another and to the community beyond. That is why we pray not only for each other, but for the community beyond, and the nation, and the world. We offer God everything in that intercessory prayer, that goes all of the way back.

Now, we move forward. Before Scripture is read, there is a Prayer of Illumination. It used to be in the bulletin. Now, Bill or I, or Ken before Bill, we pray that prayer before we read the Scripture, or after we read the Scriptures, to illuminate, before I [we] start the Sermon - because we cannot understand the Scripture just by reading it. It needs to be interpreted.

Even people who claim to be fundamentalists and: "God said it, and I believe it, and that is that" - you see those bumper stickers - they even have to interpret, because for some reason those people who are fundamentalists still let women talk; they still let women do their hair and cut their hair; they still let women put on makeup. Well, that must mean there was an interpretation, because if you go back in Scripture to the earliest parts of Scripture - whether it be Leviticus or the other rules - women were not allowed to do any of those things, so they must have taken a moment to interpret that, that we no longer take literally.

So we pray - *all of us* who have to interpret Scripture. We ask God's Holy Spirit to speak to us anew on how we interpret that word; it goes before Christianity, all the way back to the

Temple, praying for the illumination before the Priest would roll out the Scrolls. Even after the Temple was destroyed, the Rabbi would roll out the scrolls in the Synagogue and would pray before or after, for the Holy Spirit to help interpret the word of God.

That is also why we read an Old Testament lesson and a New Testament lesson. We are not just a New Testament church. There isn't an Old Testament God and a New Testament God. There isn't an Old Testament - and the New Testament replaced the Old Testament. The Old Testament is a story that is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit and that story continues in the Old and develops and grows in the New - it is a continuation of how God relates to us. The Old Testament is as important as the New and it does not replace the Old. Scripture is the foundation of who we are. We read it with reverence. We read it with our intellect. We read it, trusting and praying that the Holy Spirit will interpret what that Scripture means to us. We read an Old Testament and New Testament passage every week, because they are both equally important.

We move on to the preaching of the Word. For in the preaching of the Word that, too, goes back to the Temple time, all the way back. It moves through the earliest Church, where we hear about the prophetic messages of God being proclaimed in sermon form. These are not things we just made up. We follow them from the ancient Old Testament, all the way through 2000 years, with the New Testament beginnings to the present time.

Now, everything we do is based in Scripture. That is the reason why, when you see the prayers, often times you'll see in parentheses there is a Scripture lesson next to it, so that if people ever have the idea, or you hear some churches say, "Well, they are not biblical," I'm showing you we are *very* biblical. Here are the passages that influenced our prayers, that influenced our readings, that influenced the music. Kris and I get together and we make sure that the Scriptures fit with the music, which fits with the prayers, which fits together with the sermon. That is what makes this traditional.

I don't mean to bash. I've done contemporary worship. I did it in Waterloo every week, at the second one of the two services we did there. But I never felt comfortable with it, because there were too many things that get missed when you are doing it in a contemporary way: where you read a Scripture, you sing a lot of praise songs and then you have the Word proclaimed in the sermon. Then there will be a closing prayer, and more music, and then you go.

When was the last time you were in a contemporary service where you actually heard a Prayer of Confession? I haven't, and it misses what is described in Scripture for how we worship. You might have heard a Prayer for Illumination; but, when did you know you were hearing a Prayer of Adoration or a Prayer of Supplication? They come out in ours - named or not named. Just about every Church does a Prayer of Intercession, because everybody is praying for themselves and everybody else, but the *fullness* of what the Bible describes for its prayer is outlined for its worship. If it isn't in that passage in that worship each week, too often it gets missed.

And the reason why singing has been so profound is because, as I've said, they would sing to the gates when King David carried the arc of the covenant forward. They sang psalms around it to honor God, even as God was being carried in the arc of the covenant. Singing is profoundly central to our worship experience, so we need to be very careful. This isn't just

Scott talking. This goes back centuries about how we use our singing - our hymnody. Our hymns are central to how we believe. You can get up at a praise service and sing “Our God is an Awesome God,” and I just want to throw up, because what does it really say? It doesn’t speak to the theology of who we are.

It is hard. There is some contemporary music that is well written. I did a devotion about it this past week on Natalie Sleek, who is more of a contemporary music writer and she does beautiful work. There are others. But a lot of contemporary music is dribble, because it doesn’t speak through the Psalms, and if it does, it doesn’t go deep enough or isn’t thorough enough in its biblical understanding. That’s why our hymns are done the way they are. They may not be that catchy beat, but they are theologically deep, strong, faithful. They can always be added to, but every little “awesome God” moment just doesn’t speak to the truth of who our God is in its depth.

There is always some room because, you see that organ [Scott points to the organ], that organ wasn’t around when the arc of the covenant was being carried by King David and others to the Temple. There was a time when that organ was a very radical, demonic instrument, because they [believers] were bringing in a popular thing - like a guitar of about 300-400 years ago - and they [church leaders] were worried when they brought an organ into Church, that pretty soon we would be playing all that “hip” modern music on it. We can bring other instrumentation in - that isn’t a problem - but that instrumentation needs to have, or better have, a *depth* of theological meaning in the music that is sung.

That is why we do the worship that we do and we need to stop apologizing because it is not entertaining enough. That isn’t what it is about. It is about praising God, using God’s word and the prayers that have guided the Church from its infancy in the New Testament, all the way back to infancy in the Israelite community.

Finally, we just had an experience today in baptism. The only place that the Sacraments can be received is in worship. I have only - in 30 years - done one private baptism: Grandma was dying at the hospital and I took Elders with me to represent the congregation. No other time have I ever done a private baptism, because it is a community event - to embrace Deacon James [who was baptized that morning]; to commit that we will help raise him on behalf of the whole Church of Jesus Christ. If Sarah and Kyle move somewhere else, we are speaking on behalf of whatever church he ends up at, whether it is here or elsewhere - we on behalf of Jesus Christ in Christ’s Church, to promise to raise that child.

When you take Communion, you cannot take it alone. It has to be done in the community and it only happens in worship. When you don’t take communion, if you don’t receive baptism, it doesn’t mean you are going to hell. It means you are missing a profound moment in which the Spirit moves in and through you. It can only be offered in its moment of worship. So, when you come in on a Sunday morning, realize the depth of sacredness in the act of worship you are experiencing. This isn’t something Scott made up, or even going back to the Reformation when those Protestants were mean to the Catholics - and we split and we created our own. This goes all of the way back to the beginning of the Bible itself - and that is why we worship the way we do. Amen.