

The Essential Church: Word, Sacrament and Prayer

Roger N. Wiles

How does God call sinners to salvation, justify the elect, and sanctify His Church? What are the outward means whereby God communicates the benefits of Christ's mediation? The Westminster Larger Catechism tells us, "The outward and *ordinary means* whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation" (A. #154). Notice the term *ordinary means*. God uses words, water, bread and wine, ordinary things, to point us to an extraordinary Savior.

We are living in a day when the Church no longer believes that the ordinary means of grace are sufficient to draw people to Christ and keep them in the Church. Since Finney, American evangelicalism has moved from one ministry innovation to another trying the scratch the "itching ears" of modern man. Most Christians wrongly believe that in some measure salvation depends on man. Therefore, we struggle to do our part to help God to what He sovereignly decreed to do "before the foundation of the world." What really has been lost in American Christianity is confidence in the authority and sufficiency of the Word of God to accomplish God's purpose in the lives of His people.

God works *redemptively* one way – by His Spirit through His Word. In times past and in different ways God spoke in extraordinary ways through signs, wonders and miracles. In these last days, God has spoken to us by His Son through the ordinary means of preaching, sacraments, and prayer and through no other.¹ As Michael Horton has said, "God has promised to save and keep his people through the means he has appointed and no others; the ordinary means of grace are limited to the preached Word and the administered sacraments; God's rationale for these means is made explicit in Scripture."² The Church may not create other means to communicate grace than those which most directly and truthfully declare His Word nor declare any other message than the gospel proclaimed in Word and sacrament.³ How then are these *ordinary means* utilized in the public worship of God?⁴ Terry Johnson's simple answer is sufficient, "Read the Bible, preach the Bible, sing the Bible, pray the Bible, see the Bible."⁵

¹ Hebrews 1:1-3

² Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, Baker Books, 2002, p.29

³ Read, WCF, *Of Saving Faith*, XIV.1

⁴ Taken in part from, First Presbyterian Church Jackson MS, *A Guide To Morning Service*, Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III.

⁵ Terry L. Johnson, *Worship That Is According To Scripture*, Reformed Academic Press, Greenville, 2000, p. 35-36

We read the Bible in our public worship. Scripture commands that we “give attention to the public reading of Scripture.”⁶ The public reading of the Bible has been at the heart of the worship of God throughout redemptive history. God speaks most directly to His people through the reading of His Word.

We preach the Bible in our public worship. The preached Word is at the heart of Reformed worship. “Faith comes by hearing” the Word of God proclaimed. Faithful preaching must be expositional and evangelistic preaching, based solidly on the text itself. Biblical preaching cannot be personality driven, theologically vague or superficially practical. We must preach the “whole counsel of God”, line by line, precept by precept, book by book. Paul told Timothy, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”⁷

We pray the Bible in our public worship. Jesus said that His Father’s house would be called “a house of prayer.”⁸ Our prayers should be permeated with the language and thought of Scripture. We pray to the blessed Trinity to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. Public prayers should build faith in God’s people as to His character, attributes, grace and mercy. Prayers should reflect the priority of Scripture. We commit ourselves to prayers of invocation, intercession, illumination and supplication. Our tradition calls for studied prayer prayed from the heart where the Holy Spirit touches both the mind *and* affections of the one praying.

We sing the Bible in our public worship. Scripture commands the singing of God’s people with “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.”⁹ Singing the Psalms was once the primary source of musical worship in the Christian Church. Sadly, Psalm singing by God’s people has been lost to most of His Church. When hymns and spiritual songs are included in worship they too should comport with the substance and style of God’s songbook – the Psalms. Hymns and spiritual songs must reflect the themes, proportions, substance and weightiness of Scripture.¹⁰

⁶ I Timothy 4:13

⁷ II Timothy 4:2-4

⁸ Matthew 21:13

⁹ Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16

¹⁰ Consider the weight and substance of the *Song of Mary* in Luke 1:46-55; the *Song of Zechariah* in Luke 1:68-79; and, the *Song of Simeon* in Luke 2:29-32.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament directly encourage the congregational singing of the people of God.¹¹ Special music sung by choirs, ensembles and soloists, must never take the place of the corporate singing of the Body of Christ on the Lord's Day. Instruments are used to enhance the singing of God's people and therefore should be understated and appropriate to the worship of holy God. To "sing the Bible" means to sing that which is biblical, filled with the language, categories and theology of Scripture.

We "see" the Bible in our public worship. God has given to His Church two visible sacramental signs of His grace. These are baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹² These signs and seals of the covenant of grace are "visible signs of invisible grace."¹³ In these "visible words" we see with our eyes the promise of God. In reading and preaching God addresses the mind and conscience through hearing. In the sacraments God addresses the mind and conscience through the other senses. Through the senses God's promise is made tangible. The sacraments of God remind and assure us of His covenant. Therefore, these "visible symbols of Gospel truths" are essential to corporate worship.

Clearly, Reformed worship is worship through the Word. Therefore, words and ritual that communicate the Word of God through reading, preaching, praying, singing and sacrament are God's regulated methods of communication; these are the *ordinary means* that God has appointed to accomplish His will on the earth.

¹¹ Psalm 98:1; Revelation 5:9

¹² Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38-39; Colossians 2:11-12. Luke 22:14-20, I Corinthians 11:23-26

¹³ Saint Augustine