The Key Elements of Reformed Worship

**Q. 88. What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?**  
A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are, his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

**Q. 89. How is the Word made effectual to salvation?**  
A. The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

When you visit a church’s service of worship for the first time, hoping and anticipating your sharing with the congregation in the worship of God, what do you notice about the room in which that worship takes place? What does the room tell you? How does it display the priorities and values of the congregation which gathers there?

Let’s say you and your family were actually able to arrive early (yes, I know) and you had time to sit in the chairs (or is it pews?) and study the room as a whole before the service started. What would you learn about the congregation even before you witnessed them worshipping?

The worship room of some church buildings will be called “sanctuaries” – rooms dedicated, decorated and devoted to nothing else but worship. Here, the children are not allowed to run and the adults will tend not to speak too loudly. The ceiling is majestic and vaulted, the seating arranged in strict rows front to back and the lighting is muted. This room seems to require of you a self-restraint and to encourage you to private devotion and prayer. The worship rooms you find in other church buildings are very different – they are obviously universal spaces where the kids had their championship basketball game just yesterday amidst cheering and yelling and where the fellowship dinner will be held later tonight. Here, the brightly lit atmosphere is casual and a bit noisy (not only because of the talking but because acoustics are clearly not a concern) and the emphasis seems to be on community and fellowship as people converse in the aisles, many holding paper coffee cups. Even just prior to their time of worship, in this room, if you are sitting alone and not talking to someone, you actually feel strange and out of place.

And what do you see when you look forward? In some such rooms there will be a wide, inviting stage, perhaps with music stands and microphones, guitars, drums and other instruments strewn about. There might be a small, portable lectern in sight, either off to the side or buried in amongst everything else – or not. In other worship rooms you might look up and see a huge box of massive organ pipes set into the front wall and several rows of chairs or pews below or around those pipes reserved for choir members who will soon come out in their own colorful vestments. In front of those things, one or two heavy, wooden or even granite desks which are either permanently fixed to the their place on a smaller, restricted platform or else obviously difficult to move if one was to try. And with it, there might be other pieces of elegant, heavy and matching furniture as well.

Even before the service of worship begins, you have perceived a lot about how the congregation understands worship and how that service will probably proceed. Even before the service begins, you are getting a “feel” for how comfortable you are going to be during the service and whether or not you want to stay.

And yet, who or what is it that really determines such things? Is it simply up to each one of us to find the place where we are individually comfortable? Is the way we worship God merely a democratic process where the majority of those in attendance are free to dictate their wishes? What about God? Is God bound to accept whatever suits us to give Him? Or does God actually tell us how we are to worship Him? That may sound like a simple question to answer but the 2000 years of church history tells us it is not. Nevertheless, we are bound to try, because yielding, instead, to other, subjective inclinations alone – i.e., just whatever suits us individually, just whatever will draw and attract seekers, just the amount of money we decide to spend on a building and the activities done inside – leave God’s true presence out of the picture entirely.

So, what do we want to convey to our visitors as they first walk in the door as being important to us? What do we want to see for ourselves every time we enter this room? What do we want to be there to remind us week after week about what is important to understanding God, understanding our relationship to Him and what He desires in our service worship to Him. And, conversely, perhaps by deliberate choice as well, what items or articles do we want to declare - to ourselves and others – to be not important?

Such certain things were very important to the meaning of the 16th century Reformation and those things became distinctives of the Protestant expression of worship in the years that followed. But those things were not at all new, they were just rediscovered. The Reformers were protesting that the medieval, Roman church had badly and significantly drifted from the principles and true priorities of the Christian faith and that this was clearly visible in the rooms constructed and decorated for so-called worship. The Reformers wanted to return to biblical priorities and emphases and boldly display that return in the arrangement of the room where the true worship of God could take place.

There are three such priorities that Scripture stresses as being most important to the worship of God. The first is that of the Word of God proclaimed. The Word comes from God and, therefore, it is the primary source of hope, blessing and guidance for mankind. Even more than pointing the way of salvation, as primary as that is, Scripture also teaches us to have a proper view of our world and life now, a proper value system and ethic today, and a proper duty and responsibility now. It teaches us of our sinful hearts, it rebukes our pride, and it calls us to repentance and new trust and obedience. This means it is absolutely vital to our lives. But there is something else. The preaching of God’s Word is, itself, significant. Even more than our individually reading of it on our own, the preached Word of God is particularly crucial, for it comes to us with the authority of God and it is that authority that the Holy Spirit uses to ground our hope and faith and strengthen our trust. So the preached Word is to be significantly displayed in the worship room.

The next priority is that of the ordinances of the covenant of God, or the sacraments – baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The visible signs and seals convey vital messages to God’s people in worship, confirming them in their identity as God’s people and their calling in the world. Baptism represents the inclusion of the faithful into the number of the true church of Christ and it represents our hope and trust in God’s covenant for our children. The Lord’s Supper reminds us of the grace of God in Christ to pay for our sins through his blood and give us the hope of eternal life through the reality of his resurrection. Therefore, the ordinances of the New Testament – baptism and the Lord’s Supper – are to be prominently displayed in the worship room.

Finally, the third priority in worship is to visibly demonstrate the gathering of the saints together around the throne of grace and being constituted and recognized as the body of Christ, his bride. This is the picture described for us as early as the book of Exodus, with the Israelites surrounding Mt. Sinai all the way to John’s vision of our eternal worship in the book of Revelation. While it is wonderfully true that each of us is claimed and delivered unto salvation glory on an individual basis, we are also adopted to be part of the family of God, which is to be our new identity. The worship of God must visibly demonstrate this unity and identity as, together, we exist and witness to the world that we are the church.

Now, this is not to say that other items we are familiar with in worship – music, creeds, even the practical design of the room for human beings – are not important. It is just that these things, along with other notions, have their place underneath the expression of our first priorities. These other things are not what should first catch our eye, draw us in or set the tone as much as the items that remind us of the essence of what it means to be the covenant people of God.