

# ***Reform School: Worship fit for a King***

*This is the fourth message in a five-part series of sermons offered for the glory of God in honor of John Calvin's 500<sup>th</sup> Birthday (July 12, 2009). They are intended to illustrate the connections between our Reformed faith and the Bible.*

**A Sermon Preached by  
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**July 26, 2009**

What are we doing here this morning? We call it worship, but what is worship? What's its point? How do we know we're doing it the "right" way --- and is there only one right way? Many of us have been worshipping for years and haven't had the chance to think about these questions very much. Today we're going to change that. We'll look at what John Calvin – the founding father of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches around the world – taught about worship. My hope is that by looking at how Calvin answered these questions we'll be closer to drawing some conclusions about worship for ourselves.

Worship matters. The Bible tells us that worship is the only thing that we do in this life that we'll certainly do in the life to come (see the Book of Revelation for its images of what worship in Heaven will be like). In fact, worship is at the heart of the Christian life. Everything else Christians do – serving others, sharing burdens, living like Jesus – flows out of what we think, learn, feel, and experience in worship.

Worship matters to kids, to teens, to everyone. I just finished a week of working with 121 kids at Krislund, our Presbyterian Camp near State College, Pennsylvania. Krislund is a pretty amazing place. There's a 60' climbing wall, a 500' zip-line, 2 high ropes courses, a beautiful pool, and miles of hiking trails. The cabin counselors and the rest of the staff are creative, fun, and incredibly faithful people. Every day is full of games and singing and water fights: the best stuff of any summer camp experience. But

do you know what the highlight of the day is for most kids at Krislund? Worship.

Each night they gather for at least an hour to sing, pray, and hear a message of hope and challenge from the Bible. *And they hate it when the service is over.* You can close the climbing wall, cancel beach night, and postpone the hike to Bald Spot, but don't mess with worship at Nightfest. What we typically do here on a Sunday morning is a whole lot different than what happens at Krislund, but each service is faithful – and Reformed – in its own way.

In his theology John Calvin stressed that God is sovereign over all things. In his worship planning he set out to design services fit for a King. You see, the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Protestant Reformation in Europe wasn't just a re-thinking of what the church believed or how it was governed, but how it *worshipped*. Martin Luther led the way by insisting that worship be accessible to everyone. He conducted services in the everyday language of the people (instead of Latin, which few people understood). He also insisted that all the people in the congregation –not just the priest – should receive both the bread and cup of communion when it was served.

In those days there was a huge distance in the sanctuary between the priest and the people, both figuratively and literally. The priest was elevated faraway on the chancel while the people were way down low. And there was often a special screen shielding the priest from the people's view while he prepared the communion elements—it was kind of like a magician going behind a curtain to do his tricks. Prior to the Reformation the people were mainly spectators. Today we take being active and involved in every part of worship for granted. The Bibles are in English, the pastors sit with the people, we all receive the same bread and juice in the Lord's Supper, and we receive it more than once a year. The Reformation enabled all of God's people to participate in worship.

When it came to thinking about worship Calvin picked up where Luther left off. Instead of simply tweaking the Roman Catholic mass as Luther did, Calvin went all the way back to the Bible for his guidance. What he found there was that in the early church worship was quite simple. In Acts 2:42 – our scripture lesson for the day – it says

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

*Acts 2:42 NRSV*

Calvin took this to mean that Biblical worship includes four things: teaching, caring for each other (fellowship), the Sacraments, and prayer. He also took this verse to mean that every element in addition to these four things was potentially a distraction and should be avoided. That's why – for the most part -- Presbyterian worship tends to be simpler than Lutheran, Episcopal, or Roman Catholic worship. Calvin stripped worship down to the bare necessities. Even the robes Presbyterian clergy wear reflect our understanding of worship. Roman Catholic and Episcopal clergy wear robes that resemble ancient priestly vestments; and the see worship as offering Christ as a sacrifice in the communion observance. Presbyterians believe that Christ was sacrificed once and for all time on Calvary; no more sacrifices (symbolic or otherwise) are necessary. So Calvin chose to wear the plain black robe common to university professors in his day. Biblical simplicity, then, is the first hallmark of Reformed worship. If it can't be found in the Bible, if it distracts people from the Bible itself, if it isn't consistent with our Biblical theology, we avoid it.

Another hallmark of Reformed worship is that it is God-centered, not people-centered. For us worship isn't primarily a time to get re-charged, but a time for an encounter with God. That encounter might comfort, convict, or challenge us. But worship isn't ultimately about what happens to us; it's about honoring the almighty King of the Universe. Sometimes it may seem like nothing is going on in worship; that's ok. One Presbyterian pastor even calls worship at its best “a royal waste of time” because it's simply a gift to God and not a means to an end. We worship not to get something out of it but because our King deserves our worship and praise.

Calvin also taught that worship should be orderly, but he didn't want order itself to become an idol. This blend of order and flexibility is a third hallmark of reformed worship. As much as Calvin echoed St. Paul in insisting that “all things should be done decently and in order”[1 Cor 14:40], he was somewhat flexible in his approach to worship. In fact, he often made compromises and concessions after being pressed by his people (for example, Calvin preferred weekly communion; his Session preferred less frequent observances and they overruled him).

Calvin never would have intended the liturgy we're using this morning to be the last word on Biblical worship. Modern Reformed worship has a basic flow that we can trace back to Calvin, but the exact order of the elements of worship, and which elements are included each week, changes based on the needs of the congregation, whether that congregation is in South Central Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Korea, or South Africa. We can thank John Calvin, then, for the fact that 500 years after his birth Reformed worship still strives to be Biblical, simple, and uncluttered, God-focused, orderly and flexible.

Let's look at a few elements in our service that we might not see or hear in other denominations' worship services.

Reformed worship almost always begins with some kind of public prayer of confession. Some other denominations of Christians skip this; perhaps they see it as beating ourselves up or focusing on the negative. But for us confession is essential – and comforting.

I remember when I was in first grade, laying on my bed at night, whimpering, in hopes of getting my father's attention. You see, I had been stealing pencils from other students' desks at school, and my conscience was tormenting me. I wanted my dad to hear me and come in so that I could confess to what I had done, take my punishment, and start fresh. I was tired of keeping my secret and pretending that nothing was wrong. When my father finally came in and I unburdened my soul what I got from him was understanding and sympathy – in addition to a stern lecture – not punishment. As I look back, it was one of the times I felt closest to him.

When we confess our sin in worship, we offer ourselves to our Heavenly father like I offered myself to my Dad. And what we find is love and acceptance, not judgment. Reformed Christians confess – often – because it leads us straight back into God's gracious arms.

Today we've included the Ten Commandments in our service, just like Calvin did. We no longer read the Ten Commandments each week, but Presbyterians still believe that they show us how God calls us to live as forgiven people.

The Prayer for Illumination that we offer before the Scripture reading comes from Calvin's understanding that the Bible, God's Word, is like a

lens through which we see the world for what it really is. He said that just like we need light to make a lens work, we need to have the Holy Spirit to help us see the world through the lens of God's Word. The Bible isn't self-explanatory. Two people read scripture; one comes to faith and the other doesn't. Why? Reformed people think the difference is the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has to "illuminate" God's Word so we can understand and apply its message to our lives.

Calvin encouraged the weekly sharing of the Apostle's Creed as a perfect summary of faith. When we recite it – or sing it as we sometimes do – it reminds some of us of what we have come to believe through years of worship and study. And it challenges others of us to stretch our understanding of what it means to be a Christ-follower. If you're not ready to recite it, that's ok, but I hope that you'll take time to explore its phrases and draw your own conclusions about God.

Thanks to Calvin, Presbyterians pray a lot in worship, but not perhaps not as much as we ought to. In Calvin's day sometimes as much time was spent on prayer as on the sermon – and sermons were loooooong in those days. Reformed prayers typically focus first on the goodness and awesome nature of our Sovereign God, then thanksgiving for God's blessings, and, lastly, asking for God's help for ourselves and others, including people around the world. As with every other part of worship, our prayers don't focus simply on us and our need.

Calvin even changed the way people understood the weekly "offering." Roman Catholics *at the time* gave money in hopes of earning God's grace for themselves or others. Luther and Calvin showed that grace is a free gift from God. Calvin went on to say that the offering is a gift we give in response to God's grace and to the needs we see in our brothers and sisters. It's not an obligation; it's one of the ways we care for each other in a fellowship of faith.

Many of us leave worship with two questions in mind: Did I get anything out of it? Did we get out in time? More faithful questions might be

- not "what did I get out of it?" but "what did I put into it?"
- not "was it uplifting?" but "was God lifted up?"
- not "did we get out on time?" but "was the time well spent?"

- Not “did I like it” but “was God honored by it?”

When we focus on God rather than ourselves; when we give God our very best; when we ignore the clock and live in the moment; when we find God in the faces around us; when we we’re thinking about just how good God is .... that’s worship fit for a King. Amen.

*Dear Friend,*

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