

Membership Class

October 25, 2015

Worship Attendance and Encouragement of Others

Open with prayer

Introduction to this lecture

Last week we looked at some of the background of our part of the Christian church: our denomination (the Reformed Presbyterian Church) and our congregation (Christ Reformed Presbyterian Church). Are there any questions following up on that?

Allow 5 minutes for questions

Today we're going to look at two of the major commitments which we ask of our members, although not in the order of our membership vows. In vow 5, we promise to "keep the Lord's Day, regularly attend the worship services, [and] observe the appointed sacraments." The first part of the class will look at this commitment to worship with God's people. In vow 4, we promise also to "recognize [our] responsibility to work with others in the church and ... promise to support and encourage them in their service to the Lord."

Worshipping with the Church

Before we begin talking about something *we* do (worship), we need to talk about what *God* has done — God's great work which we respond to in worship.

As Christians, we believe that there is one God, who has always existed in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God made all things for his own glory, and made mankind in his own image. Although he made us to glorify and enjoy him, we out of our pride and self-worship rebelled against him. We were driven out of God's presence, and since that time all human beings are slaves to sin against God. We have a built-in tendency to look

for what serves us without caring about each other or about our Creator. For that reason, every human attempt to build a good community or a good society falls apart in the end. Only when a people submit themselves to God can they experience his blessing for long.

The truth is that we are made for friendship with God and with one another. But on our own we are unable to bring that about. Without new hearts, we don't even really *want* friendship with God. The good news is that God has reached down to us when we could not reach up to him. He did that by sending his beloved Son to live among us, become one of us, and show us what God's love really is. When we see Jesus we see God's love in a person, and we see the depth of God's love for people. A testimony to that love is that when God gives us new hearts, we don't just become new creatures one by one. He makes us part of his nation, his people, his kingdom. That new identity is difficult: sometimes it means that we have to share our lives with people we don't totally understand and sometimes with people we don't even *like* very much. But we need to see that Jesus Christ did exactly that for us: he became part of a world that wasn't even interested in him: "the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil," (John 3:19). But even though a dark world didn't want him, Christ loved us: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers," (1 John 3:16).

So the reason for worship is Jesus Christ's death, resurrection, and reign; it is the great work that he has done in the world and that he has done in each of us, causing us to be born again through faith in him.

But a lot of people, including many Christians, hear this kind of talk and say, "That's great, but can't I worship God without going to worship services? Can't I just honor God in the way that I live my everyday life?" It's hard to give simple Bible passages to answer these questions, because for the most part, the Bible assumes we understand it. When we talk about *worship* we mean the love and desire for something that leads us to sacrifice for it. A man who is really in love spends money on the woman he loves; he thinks about her; he makes time for her; he sings ridiculous love songs about her, right? When he does those

things his love is celebrated and becomes stronger. All of life is worship. But a life without times of *dedicated* worship is not worship.

We sometimes think that we can worship in an “inner” way without worshiping in an “outer” way. I don’t need to *go to church*; the church is in my heart. But biblically, love and worship are not just inner actions; they are outward and inward. I pray with my heart, but I also bow my head and close my eyes, and sometimes I kneel. Worship is basic to who we are. We are worshiping creatures — at least as much as we are thinking creatures. Worship is so important that the Bible is filled with warnings against worshiping the wrong things: this is called “idolatry.” When we worship things that are not God, we become like them, just as we become more like God when we worship him.

Our individual spiritual lives are important. But we’re starting out with talking about worship as part of the church, the “body of Christ,” because our individual spirituality has to be anchored in corporate (whole church) worship. We see corporate worship throughout the Bible. The grandfather of Israel, Abraham, was given a covenant sign of his bond with God: “This is my covenant ... every male among you shall be circumcised,” (Genesis 17:10). God laid claim to Abraham *and all he possessed*. In the time of Moses, God gave careful instructions to the people, telling them how he wanted to be worshiped. Their worship consisted of the weekly sabbath, daily sacrifices, annual feasts and fast days. Each year thousands of animals were sacrificed. And though God appointed priests to lead the people in worship, he also said that the whole nation was a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” (Exodus 19:6).

In the New Testament, the first Christians gathered to worship God, often daily, but consistently on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2): “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers,” (Acts 2:42). We also know that they sang God’s praises, using the Old Testament psalms, the songbook of Jesus: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God,” (Colossians 3:16). All Christian worship has these practices at its heart: preaching and teaching from the Bible, the sacrament, prayer, and song.

I'll be straightforward. When you commit to "regularly attend the worship services," you are saying that going to church will be your top priority come Sunday morning. You should stay home if you're sick, of course, and some people's work forces them to miss church. But aside from those things, plan on coming to church every week, for the rest of your life! Worship shapes and changes you into someone more like Christ. Your presence in worship also shapes and changes *the people around you*. We are engaged in the great work of worship together: don't miss it. Worship is so central to who we are as Christians that if you miss (dramatic music!) we will track you down! Seriously, we will follow up if you miss a few weeks, because we take this seriously. As one pastor likes to say, when people are skipping church, it's either because they're in sin or they're about to be.

Keeping the Lord's Day

We make two commitments that are closely tied to attending worship. First, we promise to keep the Lord's Day. God commanded Israel, "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God," (Exodus 20:9-10). Depending on what list of the ten commandments you read, the reasons given for the Sabbath commandment are either creation (that God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh), or salvation (that God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and gave them rest, so they are to give rest to those who work as well). In the New Testament, Christians worshiped on the first day of the week, in honor of Jesus' resurrection on the first day, and in recognition that a new era had dawned. We recognize the first day of the week (Sunday) as the Christian equivalent of the Sabbath. The whole day is a day of worship — we set it aside for God, and avoid unnecessary work.

The details of how people keep the Lord's Day (as we call Sunday sometimes, following Revelation 1:10) will vary, and that's fine. But here are some general guidelines. First, remember that the Sabbath commandment is not just about you, it's about others: "on it you shall do no labor, you nor your son nor your daughter, your manservant nor your maidservant, your ox nor your donkey, nor your stranger who is within your gates." So try not to make others work. Do your shopping on Saturday. Help your kids do their homework

or chores on Saturday. When I taught school I tried to never schedule tests on a Monday. If you can schedule work some other time, do so. Second, focus on Lord's Day rest as something we *get* to do rather than something we *have* to do. Other than Ebenezer Scrooge, I don't hear people griping about businesses being closed on Christmas: why would we complain about setting aside work for one whole day each week?! The Scriptures are full of examples of how to have a holiday. The big four categories are worship (which we've talked about), rest (take a nap or go for a walk, especially if you have to do "brainwork" most of the time), feasting (it is good to eat a big Sunday dinner — maybe Dad can do the dishes to give Mom more of a rest), and mercy. For several years members of this congregation got up at 5AM to serve coffee and donuts to the homeless on Sunday morning. Make the Lord's Day, our Sabbath, your delight. Spend time in fellowship with other Christians, and with non-Christians. Practice hospitality. It'll be great.

The Sacraments

The other commitment we make along with attending worship is participating in "the appointed sacraments." Jesus commanded his disciples to eat this meal as a central part of their worship practice (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Historically many Presbyterian churches have celebrated the Lord's Supper infrequently, sometimes only once or twice a year, and preceded "Communion Sunday" with a few days (up to a week) of preparatory services. Without saying that was a wicked practice, it is probably more the result of circumstance than theology. Many years ago, with very few pastors to administer the Lord's Supper, some denominations (including ours) were forced to make Communion rare and special. But we don't do that. We believe that like family meals, Lord's Suppers are times when eating and drinking together connects us more firmly with one another and especially with the Lord. When you worship with us, you will normally celebrate the Lord's Supper. That said, the Supper is a big deal. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, notorious party animals who seem to have treated the Lord's Supper as a buffet combined with an open bar, that their behavior was leading God to punish them with bad health and even death (1 Corinthians 11:27-30). As you come into the presence of God, especially eating and drinking, repent of your sin,

including sins against other people. Eating and drinking with a someone you haven't forgiven is false: it's like kissing someone you don't love. And it's not just false regarding our relationship with one another: it is false because in the Supper we celebrate God's forgiveness for us.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church teaches that people who are known to be in sin should be prevented from taking the Lord's Supper by the elders of the congregation. This is part of what's called "church discipline," which we'll be talking about in a future class. The RP Church also teaches that the Supper is not just for people who identify themselves as Christians, but who are part of a Christian church. That is why when guests visit we check with them to see if they are members of a church somewhere before inviting them to take the bread and wine with us.

The sacrament which Jesus Christ instructed us to practice (Matthew 28:18-20) is baptism. This could be a long discussion so I'll just make three quick points. First, in the RP Church it is up to each session (board of elders) what baptisms they will recognize, within the basic rule: you must be baptized with water in the name of the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This session, then, recognizes baptism in the Roman Catholic Church as a real baptism, although we think there are very serious problems with that church. Second, we believe that the *mode* of baptism is not something strictly commanded in the Bible. In other words, you can be baptized by a little water on the head ("sprinkling") or by going completely underwater in a river or a pool ("immersion"). We have baptized lots of people each way in this church. Third, we believe that the children of believers ought to be baptized. Baptism is for those who believe and those under their authority, like circumcision (remember Abraham!). It is clear that baptism happened *by household* several times in the New Testament, including at least one instance where it is not said that everyone in the household believed (Acts 16:14-15). And Paul affirmed that the children of those who believe are holy — set apart to God because of their parents' holiness (1 Corinthians 7:14; also Matthew 19:14). If you are a member of this congregation, your children must be baptized: we believe this is a matter of obedience to God. On that gentle, affirming note, are there questions?

Allow 5 minutes for questions

Support and Encourage One Another (vow 4)

Remember what I quoted from vow 4: “Do you recognize your responsibility to work with others in the church and do you promise to support and encourage them in their service to the Lord?” Time is short in this lecture so I’d like to give you four ways you can support and encourage others in this congregation (or really any congregation).

Pray. Pray for other people in the church. If you can’t remember all the people in the church, that’s okay — we’ll have a new directory out soon and you can start to learn who they are. If your memory is bad like mine (Pastor Howe), make a list and pray from it. Pray that God would help people with their daily needs (work, health, peace with other people), but also pray that God would shape and change them so that they are more like Jesus Christ. When someone is baptized, the pastor generally asks the congregation this question: “Do you, the members of this congregation, receive this person into your fellowship and promise to pray for him, and to help and encourage him in the Christian life?” Prayer is the most basic duty which we have toward one another outside of worship.

Participate. Everyone is busy, we know. In American culture, we treat being “busy” as a good thing, not realizing that often we are busy with stupid things (like watching TV) or that being busy has a way of destroying our connections with other people. Today Americans don’t know their neighbors and have few close friends. We don’t want to be like that. The simplest way to support and encourage one another is to *go to stuff*. If there is a congregational meeting, go to it: you’re needed there! Go to Sunday School if there is a class. Participate in Catechism memorization (this is very important if you’re a new member or a young Christian). Go to parties and other events. No one can participate in everything. If you are at a distance you’ll have to plan carefully. But the church is our community: let’s act like it!

Plan. This congregation needs people who to participate, but we also need people to make things happen: to schedule game nights and dinners and midweek groups. I (Pastor

Howe) believe this an area where we are weak and need to get stronger. If you think there is a need for some kind of church activity, talk to the elders: 90% of the time we're going to say, do it. Don't be offended if your activity isn't as well attended as you'd like: remember that we are all recovering individualists, like you. And don't be offended if people don't understand all the rules and customs you do. God is most glorified when people love one another in the middle of messiness. We don't set out to plan badly, but we'd rather plan badly than plan nothing.

Finally, *peanut butter*. Yes, that most lowly of foods can be a key part of supporting and encouraging one another. We are called to show hospitality to one another (Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 5:10; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9), to "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God," (Romans 15:7). For some of us, having other people into our houses is easy and natural; for others, it's difficult. Maybe we think that to have church friends over we need to cook a fancy meal or have the house perfectly clean. Not so: "Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife," (Proverbs 17:1). Many years ago an Irish RP pastor, visiting a family in his church, got tired of the distracting, fancy meal his hostess was serving. He thumped his fist down on the table: "I don't want a cup of tea, I don't want a muffin, I don't want any cake: I want to *be with you*." Good fellowship over peanut butter blesses others and pleases God.