



*Questions about the*  
*WORSHIP SERVICES*

*in the*

*PROTESTANT*  
*REFORMED*  
*CHURCHES*



# QUESTIONS ABOUT THE WORSHIP SERVICES IN THE PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCHES

Sometimes those who are not themselves members of the Protestant Reformed Churches raise questions about various aspects of our worship services. They wish to know, for example, why certain things are included in the service and other things are excluded. Likewise, they would like to understand why certain elements of the service receive so much emphasis while others are given less attention. These are good questions and are worth the asking.

We hope in this pamphlet to answer a few of the questions which are asked of us. Although we cannot go into much detail in our answers, we certainly hope enough information is given to show the Scriptural rationale behind the elements of our worship services. If there are any more questions, feel free to write or call us.

1. One element of worship that a person unfamiliar with our services most often notices is the length of our sermons. Our services are approximately an hour and a half, and most of that time is spent listening to the preaching. For one accustomed to shorter sermons the question quite naturally arises: *“Why so long?”*

In the first place, we take seriously the call of Christ to His church to preach the Gospel. Paul tells Timothy in II Timothy 4:1-2, “I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ ... preach the Word; be instant in season, and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” It is evident from I

Corinthians 9:16 that Paul himself took this charge very seriously: "For though I preach the Gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel!" Such necessity to preach the Word is laid upon the church because the preaching is the very power of God unto salvation. Such also is the teaching of I Corinthians 1:18-25, which emphasizes that, "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." The preaching is the chief means of grace, for it not only works faith in the hearts of many, but it also strengthens and confirms the faith of the child of God. For that reason the sermon occupies in our services a central position. We believe it is the most important element of worship, around which the rest of our service revolves.

In the second place, our sermons are longer because we feel this is necessary to do justice to the explanation of a passage of God's Word. It is true that some passages require less time to expound than others, but enough time must be allowed in order to give a passage its due. If this is not done, we believe, the Word of God is often given a rather cursory and superficial treatment. For this reason we allot more time to the expounding of the Scriptures. Neither does this present a problem as far as attention is concerned. At a very young age our children are taught to sit in church and quietly meditate on the Word being preached. As they grow, their hearts and minds become trained in this spiritual exercise, and as a result they learn to concentrate on the preaching.

2. Another aspect of our worship that reveals itself almost immediately is the quiet, reserved atmosphere that surrounds the service. This often prompts the question, "*Why are your services so quiet and solemn, and not lively and joyful?*" Again, this is a legitimate question, although we must keep in mind that being quiet and solemn

does not mean that our services are not lively and joyful. Sitting under the lively preaching of the Word gives us the greatest of all joys. We are a happy people who rejoice in the salvation given us by God through our Lord Jesus Christ. The solemnity of our services should not at all therefore be equated with an absence of joy.

We believe that, when entering the house of God, we are spiritually entering into the very presence of God Himself, and into the presence of Christ. Since God is the sovereign, majestic God of heaven and earth, the Holy One Who manifests Himself in all His glory, we ought to come before Him with fear and trembling. As the prophet exclaims in Habakkuk 2:20, "But the Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him." We too must in silence bow before our God. We attempt, also, to keep out of the service anything that might draw attention to man and away from God. We wish our services to be God-glorifying. This is done best, we believe, when we worship quietly and reverently. We follow, therefore, the injunction of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 5:1, 2, "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few."

3. In a certain sense the answers to the two questions just asked constitute the answer also to this third question which is often asked: "*Why is there no time given to special music or other special ministries during the worship service?*" Before answering this question it must be understood that the Protestant Reformed Churches have nothing against choirs, musical groups, or any others who have received of God special gifts that can be used for the benefit of the church and God's

people. Many of our churches have their own choirs which do a splendid job of singing sacred music. But, it is true that our churches do not give to these a place in our worship services. There are two reasons for this.

In the first place, we believe that the time spent in worship ought to be used to accomplish the official ministry or work of the church. The calling of the church is to administer the means of grace. These are the preaching and the sacraments. Our worship services are devoted entirely to these therefore. Anything that might diminish time spent under the preaching (the power of God unto salvation, remember!) ought simply to be excluded from the worship service. There is surely a place for singing by choirs — but not in the worship service.

The second reason we avoid any kind of special music or other ministries during the worship service is our desire to focus our attention on God alone. This is *best* done under the preaching. Special music and ministries, though perhaps not intended to, often turn our attention to persons rather than God. Even if this is not always true, nevertheless we believe it is a danger. So we try to avoid this by keeping our services simple and centered in the Word of God preached.

4. A question that is often asked by those who are not familiar with Reformed churches in general is: ***“Why do you, in one of the services each Lord’s day, preach on the Heidelberg Catechism rather than on a particular passage of God’s Word?”*** Before answering this question we ought to review this practice of our churches. Churches of Reformed persuasion adhere to three creeds written around the time of the great Reformation in Europe (16th century). These creeds are: *The Belgic Confession* (1561), *The Canons of Dordrecht* (1618-1619), and *The Heidelberg Catechism* (1563). The Reformed *Church Order* requires

that Reformed churches must, as much as possible, in one year's time preach their way through the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Our churches follow this practice. The question is: "Why?"

The answer: in order that the people of God might receive systematic instruction in *all* the truths revealed in God's Word. If a minister simply chooses passages to preach, it is very easy for him to overlook certain truths of the Bible which need to be taught and understood by his congregation. He does not necessarily do this purposely; it simply happens. Certain doctrines of Scripture are inadvertently overlooked. The result is that the congregation can easily forget these truths, and the church grows weaker. To avoid this problem our Reformed fathers required that a minister preach his way through the Heidelberg Catechism. This confession in a warm, personal way presents all the great truths of the Bible, and by preaching through it a congregation is consistently reminded of these truths. We believe the practice is, therefore, a good one.

But is it right for a minister to preach out of a Confession rather than the Bible itself? That too is a good question. The answer is "Yes," as long as the Confession itself is thoroughly grounded in, and therefore an expression of, what the Bible teaches. Then when one preaches out of the Confession he is also preaching out of the Bible itself. In fact, he is constantly making reference to many passages of the Scriptures, showing how the truth he is proclaiming is indeed biblical. By using the *Heidelberg Catechism* the minister is able to blend together the many passages of the Bible that teach a particular truth and to unfold for his congregation that truth in all its beauty. For that reason our members have always enjoyed *Heidelberg Catechism* preaching.

5. One last question that often arises in the mind of one who visits our worship services is: "Why

*do you sing versifications of the Psalms rather than hymns?"* Again, before answering this question we would like it to be understood that there are many hymns we do enjoy singing, as long as they are thoroughly biblical. Yet, we admit, that when it comes to congregational singing during the worship service we are indeed partial to Psalm singing! Our congregations have come to love singing out of *The Psalter*, as one can usually tell when singing together with us.

There are two reasons we use versifications of the Psalms rather than hymns. The first is: Psalms are biblical. The Psalms are songs inspired by the Holy Spirit. What better way could there be to keep a worship service centered in the Word of God than to use that Word in our songs? What better way to keep error out of the church than to limit the songs for worship to God's inspired songbook? Too often error has been introduced into the church by allowing the sweet and melodious, yet heretical, music and words of men to be sung in the church. Singing versifications of the Psalms safeguards the church from this emotional and therefore alluring way which the enemies of the church, at times, use to lead her astray.

A second reason we use versifications of the Psalms is found in their content. As churches we emphasize the sovereign majesty and glory of our God. We preach of His sovereign rule, His sovereign grace, and His sovereign purpose for all things. The Psalms are filled with this emphasis. They are filled with depth and meaning, as opposed to many (not all) hymns which are rather superficial in character. Since the Psalms express the glory and might of God we enjoy singing them because they best express our faith. For that reason we continue the practice demanded of us by our Reformed *Church Order* in Article 69, "Only the 150 Psalms of David, ... shall be sung."

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We hope the answers given to these few important questions will assist you in understanding why our worship services are conducted the way they are. If you have further questions about the issues addressed in this pamphlet, or if you have questions about other issues, feel free to call or write us.

1st Protestant Reformed Church  
3641 104th Ave.  
Holland MI 49424  
USA



(Phone: 396-8303)

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*Remembering the Lord's Day* ..... D. Engelsma  
*Grace Uncommon* ..... B. Gritters  
*Women in Church Office* ..... R. Cammenga  
*Psalm-Singing* —

*A Reformed Heritage* ..... J. Kortering  
*Creation? or Evolution?* ..... G. VanBaren  
*The Covenant of God and the*

*Children of Believers* ..... D. Engelsma  
*The Faith and Practice of the PRC*

Other material is available for purchase:

*The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*  
(their doctrinal development) — reprint of the  
last half of the out-of-print *The Protestant*  
*Reformed Churches in America*, by H.  
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