

Rehearsing Grace

We gather each week to be renewed as we rehearse the basics of grace. We gather to be renewed in our relationship to our Father. That happens as we rehearse the story of the gospel and allow that to sink deeply into our hearts and minds. This happens throughout our entire service. In fact, the very structure of the service itself, is meant to remind us of how God meets us in the gospel.

Meeting with God

When we gather together as God’s people, we gather not just to meet with one another, but to meet with God. We truly believe that when we gather, God meets with us (See, for example, Ex 25:22; 29:43; Mt 18:20; 1 Co 3:16; Eph 2:19–22; Heb 4:16; 1 Pt 2:4–9). This is why our service is structured as a dialogue. In each step of the service, first God speaks to us (through His word) and then we respond in things like repentance, faith, prayer and singing.

Renewing Commitment

The entire worship service is about being renewed in our commitment to God. It has at times been popular for older married couples to “renew their vows.” This is similar to the covenant renewal ceremonies so common in Scripture (see, for ex., Jos 24; Ne 8–10).

This happens each step of the way, as God renews His invitation, His call, His assurance, and once again draws us near before sending us back out into the world to serve Him once more. This happens as we respond to that invitation and show up, respond to His call and confess, respond to His assurance and confess, respond to His drawing and come near, and respond to His commission and go out to serve Him throughout our week.



Invited In

The very first thing that happens in our service is God calls us to worship. The call to worship is always a passage of Scripture which in some way calls us to know, believe, trust, obey, or stand in awe of our God. While our calls to worship tend to be “responsive readings,” *make no mistake*, we are not calling one another to worship. God calls us to Himself through His word.

This is important, because in the gospel, God is

always the initiator. It is not correct to think of man seeking God and God waiting passively for man to find him. God is the ultimate seeker. Jesus said that the Father was seeking people to worship Him (Jn 4:23). And so we find many invitations in Scripture (Isa 1:18; 55:1-3; Jn 7:37). One of the greats is found on the lips of Jesus: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

Though God always initiates, by God’s grace we do respond to God’s overtures. We immediately respond, in our service, in praise as we sing a song focused on the greatness of God and then in prayer, as we call on God to be present with us as we gather. God calls us to worship. We respond by calling Him to be present with us in our worship.

Coming Clean

The second “step” of our worship service is coming clean. All kinds of relationships tend to get muddled when we sin against one another, take each other for granted, use others for our own ends rather than loving them for their good, and so on. How do you repair what has been broken? Confession. This is good practice in any relationship, and it is the means of “clearing the air” that God has given in our relationship with himself.

And so, first, God calls us to confession. God’s word is like a mirror, showing us ourselves, our sin, our rebellion. Any passage of Scripture could be used as a call to confession, because every passage of Scripture shows us our brokenness. Of course, some passages do that more obviously than others. God’s moral law is a good example. The ten commandments tell us how to live. But as soon as we begin to understand them, we see how far we have fallen short. The prophets often call out God’s people of their day for failing to keep the law, for failing to live lives devoted to their God. These passages too call us to confession.

Our response, of course, is to confess our sin. We do that in two ways. First, we confess our sin together using a prayer printed in the bulletin. We do not “read a prayer,” but *pray*, using the words in the bulletin, the same way we do not read a song, but *sing*, using the words printed in the hymnal. The confession is meant to be a real, corporate confession. And the goal should be to own the words you say, in both a corporate and, as appropriate, an individual sense.

Second, we confess our sin together in a moment of silence, given to allow us to confess our individual sins to our God. This is not a time to check out for a minute, but to consider specific ways you have sinned against God this week. Allow the printed confession to guide you. Don’t



worry if you get distracted. Everyone will sometimes. Just pray about the distraction and move on.



Made New

The third “step” of our worship service is being made new by the gospel. At the heart of our service is God’s word of commitment to us in the assurance of God’s grace. Often this comes from a verse like 1 Jn 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

This verse assures us that, having just confessed our sins as God’s believing people, God really and truly forgives us, in this moment, for our sin. It is this word of grace that makes us new, as the Scripture’s teach, we are born again

by the word (1 Pt 1:23; Jas 1:18) and cleansed by it (Jn 15:3; Ep 5:26).

If there is a baptism to be performed in the service, this is the moment for it to happen.

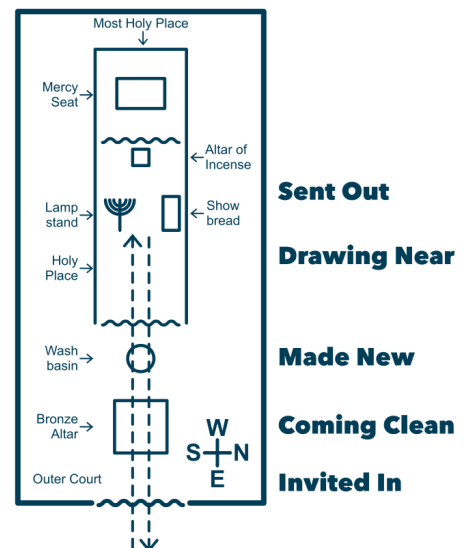
Baptism is God’s oath, His signature, His wedding ring given to confirm His vow *and* the sign of our renewal by the word. It is the visible seal and sign of His word of promise.

In response to God’s commitment to us in the gospel, we commit to Him. Out of the new life that we have been given, having been renewed in the spirit of our minds, we confess what we now believe. In our service we confess our faith together using one of the ancient creeds of the church. We use these creeds to show that what we believe is not new or novel. It didn’t begin with us. Rather, we believe what God’s people have believed for generations.

Drawing Near

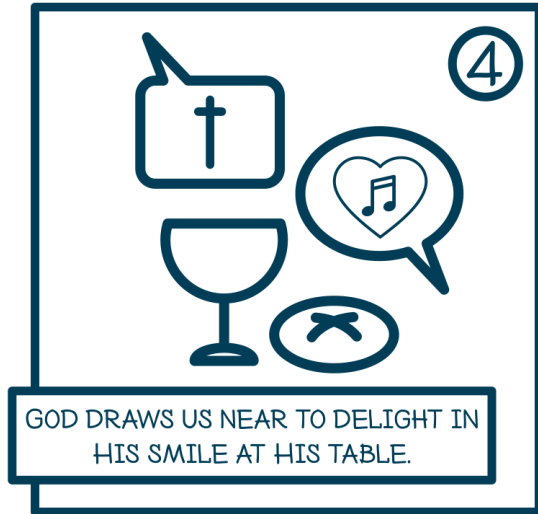
God, having invited us in, cleaned us up, and made us new by grace, we now draw near. The Old Testament picture of this was in the tabernacle. Having confessed sin over the sacrifice at the bronze altar and washed in the bronze basin, the priests enter the holy place where they enjoy communion with God.

This took place as they came into the symbolic light of God’s glory (via the lampstand) ate (and replaced) the showbread (weekly), and offered up prayers symbolized in the incense. We do this each week as we see the light of



God's glory in the face of Jesus in the Scriptures, partake of the Lord's Supper, and offer up our prayers to God. Whereas God comes to us in word and sacrament, we go to him through prayer. The altar of incense was on one side of the curtain that separated the holy place from

the most holy place, but the smoke from the altar was said to fill the most holy place and so come before the throne of God, embodied in the ark of the covenant. In the same way, by our prayers we come into the throne room of God that we may find mercy and grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:14-16).



Notice, these things are not so odd as they might at first sound. What we are saying is, we set aside a time, to sit at a table with a person, to enjoy their presence, and share with them our heart. God first "set's the table." Then we sit at His table to draw near to His presence. This is the heart of drawing near to our Father.

Sent Out

The final step in our service is being sent out. We live all of life in God's presence. But, in another sense, we don't. We go out from the church each week, into the world. Sunday is our day of rest; Monday begins our week of service. When we draw near we come to receive from God. When we go out, we go out to serve Him.

We are sent out each week in the commission. This might be any commission or command from Scripture or a summary of the application of the sermon that Sunday. In the commission God sends us out to bless the world and bring glory to Himself. The commission is immediately followed by the benediction, because, we can't bless the world unless God blesses us. A good example of a commission and benediction is Matthew 28:18-20, "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with



you always, to the end of the age.’” The commission: Go. The Benediction: I am with you always. God sends us out from His presence (as it were), but then goes with us to bless us that we might be a blessing to others.

This means our response to the final elements in the worship service (the commission & benediction) is our life lived Monday through Saturday. Our worship is not complete until we go out into the world to serve others as God has served us, to love as we have been loved, to give ourselves away for the good of others (Mt 16:24; Ro 12:1; Php 2:4–5; 1 Pt 4:10–11).

A Heart that Sings

While not a single step in the service, our services are punctuated with singing. We live in a culture with very little public singing, except that done by the professionals. And, except the exhibitionist types who religiously attend karaoke night, many of us are too self-conscious to let it all out. But God calls us to sing. Why? Because songs not only express truths, they express emotions. While we don't want empty *emotionalism*, we do want emotion. We should be moved by spiritual things. Singing gives us the opportunity to express that to God and to one another.

We are to sing joyfully (Ps 95:1). We are to sing about what God has done (Ps 98:1). We are to sing “a new song,” meaning not just a novel song, but a new song in light of God's latest work of deliverance (Ps 96:1; 149:1; Isa 42:10). We are to sing with instrumentation (Ps 150:3–5). But, one of the things we are most likely to miss is who we are to sing *to*. Yes, of course, we are to sing to God (Ps 13:6; 104:33; 147:7). But we are also to sing *to* one another (Ep 5:19). Singing together actually builds community. And when we belt out praise to God unashamed (even when a little off key), it encourages others to put all their hope and trust in Him.

REHEARSING GRACE

The Pattern of Worship

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COME

YES LORD.

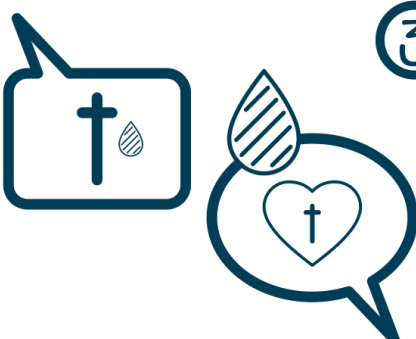
GOD INVITES US INTO HIS PRESENCE.

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GOD CLEANS US UP BY FORGIVING OUR SINS THROUGH CHRIST'S BLOOD.

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GOD MAKES US NEW BY THE WASHING OF WATER WITH THE WORD.

④



GOD DRAWS US NEAR TO DELIGHT IN HIS SMILE AT HIS TABLE.

⑤



GOD SENDS US OUT TO SERVE WITH HIS BLESSING-PRESENCE.