

Presbyterian Worship Questions and Answers

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Introduction

Beginning in the sixteenth century, Protestant Reformers used catechisms—little books of questions and answers—to teach the basics of Christian faith, life, and worship. One of those documents, the 1647 Westminster Shorter Catechism, has been especially influential for generations of Presbyterians. It begins with this deceptively simple question: “What is the chief end of man?” (*Book of Confessions*, 7.001)—or to update the language—What is the meaning of human life?

Answer: To glorify and enjoy God forever. That’s our highest goal, our deepest longing, our greatest delight. And that’s exactly what Christian worship is all about: glorifying and enjoying God, now and forever. We can glorify and enjoy God in many ways—at work, at play, through service and study, with family and friends, and in personal prayer. But the clearest example comes in Christian worship, when the people of God are gathered in the presence of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is where we come to know the glory of God and the purpose of the life that God has given us. Of course, our services of worship don’t always measure up to this lofty goal. The church—and its worship—are “always being reformed” (*semper reformanda*) according to God’s Word and Spirit.

This is a book of questions and answers, like those Reformed catechisms. It reflects more than a decade of experience working in the national offices of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), where I answer questions about worship almost every day. Indeed, the questions in this book are inspired by those real-life e-mails, phone

calls, and conversations. As in those exchanges, I always try to use these questions as opportunities for deeper reflection on worship and discipleship. My hope is that readers will find much practical guidance in these pages—but more importantly, that they will be able to practice thinking theologically about worship, developing new questions and answers of their own.

This book may be used in a variety of ways—it might be read section by section or used as a reference for particular questions, a resource for worship committees, a study for sessions seeking to renew or reform the congregation’s worship, or in the training of pastors, musicians, and other worship leaders. It is not necessary to read the questions in order. The short format of each answer might be used as a prompt for further discussion or reflection around a particular topic. A glossary in the back offers brief definitions of key terms.

This book includes numerous references to other books. As Presbyterians, our ultimate authority on worship is the Bible, as it reveals the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ; quotations from Scripture and other biblical references are noted in parentheses. The creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) offer valuable theological and historical insight on worship in the Reformed tradition; these sources are indicated with numerical citations of the *Book of Confessions* (as in the first paragraph above). I have also included occasional quotations from John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; these are labeled *Institutes*, followed by book, chapter, and section numbers. The Directory for Worship, found in our *Book of Order*, is the constitutional document describing the theology and practice of worship in this denomination; references to the Directory for Worship begin with W, as in W-1.0101. Finally, our *Book of Common Worship* (revised in 2018) provides models for worship, additional texts for various occasions, and theological and pastoral commentary on the liturgy.

To glorify and enjoy God forever. In a sense, that is the answer to every question in this book. I pray that it will inspire, inform, and equip the church and its members in fulfilling that “chief end.”

1

Worship Basics

1 What is worship?

The word *worship* comes from an Old English root: “worth-ship.” It suggests something or someone worthy of honor, glory, and praise. As a noun, *worship* can mean an act of reverence, a religious practice, or a feeling of respect. It is, in ordinary and universal use, a sign of worth.

But for Christians, it might be better to think of worship as a verb. To worship is to love the one who first loved us. To worship is to bless the one from whom all blessings flow. To worship is to show our gratitude for God’s amazing grace. To worship is to give your life to the giver of life.

For Christians, worship is a Trinitarian event. Our worship is always directed *to God, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit*. This is why many of our prayers and hymns end with some version of this Trinitarian doxology (expression of praise). The holy, triune God is the only one worthy of our worship. Jesus is our model and mediator, the one who shows us what true worship is and the one through whose grace we stand in God’s presence. The Holy Spirit reveals God’s gracious word and action and empowers our grateful response.

For Christians, worship and service are two sides of the same coin. In fact, in biblical Hebrew, “worship” and “serve” are two meanings of the same word, *abad* (see Exod. 8:1, e.g.). The word *liturgy* comes from the Greek term *leitourgia*, meaning “work of the people” or “public service” (see Heb. 8:6). There should be no

contradiction between our Sunday worship of God and our daily service of God. Our words and actions in the sanctuary are always connected with what we say and do in the street. As we are called to show our love to God in worship, so we are called to show God's love to our neighbors in the world.

Therefore, to worship means to lead a life worth living—a life that honors the giver of our life and makes a positive difference in the lives of others. In short, it's the only thing worth doing.

2 Why do we worship?

We worship to glorify and enjoy God (see the introduction). The purpose of worship is to give blessing and honor and praise and thanksgiving to God. In good times and in bad, in joy and in sorrow, we glorify the giver of our life. Even—or especially—when we're not enjoying life very much, through the worship of God we experience the deep promise and joy of life restored and made new in Christ. We worship God because God is God. We worship because God *is*.

But let me tell you a secret. There are other good things that happen when we worship God. You might think of them as positive side effects or fringe benefits, overflowing from the gracious abundance of God.

Worship builds relationships and forms community. When we gather in God's presence, we draw closer to one another in the body of Christ. Worship teaches faith and shapes discipleship. When we hear God's word, we learn and grow as believers and followers of Christ. Worship feeds our souls and fills our hearts. When we enjoy Communion with Christ, we are nourished by the grace of God. Worship inspires action and equips for service. When we are sent out in Jesus' name, we go forth to show God's righteousness, justice, and mercy to others.

We have to be very careful that we never mistake these side effects or fringe benefits for the main thing: giving glory to God. When building relationships and forming community become the main thing, worship becomes a social club. When teaching faith

and shaping discipleship become the main thing, worship becomes a school. When feeding souls and filling hearts become the main thing, worship becomes a museum or concert. When inspiring action and equipping for service become the main thing, worship becomes a political rally.

So we keep returning to the main thing, the real purpose of worship: to glorify and enjoy the holy, triune God—made known to us in Scripture, made present by the Holy Spirit, and made flesh in Jesus Christ. This is our lighthouse, our landmark. As long as worship is God-directed, God will keep us in faithful paths and pour out the blessings of deep relationships, strong faith, abiding wonder, and inspired service.

3 Do Christians really have to go to worship?

Why do we need to attend worship services? Isn't what we believe and how we live more important? In fact, what we believe, how we worship, and how we live are deeply and inextricably connected. Like a three-legged stool, if any of these elements is missing, we lose our balance, and the life of discipleship cannot be supported or sustained.

Early Christians knew this very well. In the fourth century, those who wanted to join the church were expected to memorize the Apostles' Creed (what we believe), the Lord's Prayer (how we pray or worship), and the Ten Commandments (how we live). The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers also understood this. They wrote catechisms around those same core texts, with questions and answers to elaborate on their implications for Christian faith, Christian worship, and Christian life.

These three aspects of Christian formation may also be connected with the distinguishing marks of the church in the Reformed tradition. John Calvin said that the true church is found where the Word of God (what we believe) is preached and heard and where the sacraments are celebrated (how we worship) according to Christ's institution. The Scots Confession added

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a third note—ecclesiastical discipline (how we live) uprightly administered.

There remains in the Reformed tradition a strong emphasis on common faith, corporate worship, and public life. In the Presbyterian Church, we seek the mind of Christ (what we believe) together through communal discernment in the councils of the church (as in sessions, presbyteries, and General Assemblies). We experience the saving grace of God (whom we worship) together, especially through the gifts of Word and sacrament. We strive to follow the way of the Spirit (how we live) together in our common life and witness in the world.

These days, it is common to hear people talk about church membership in terms of “believing, belonging, and behaving.” This is but a new variation on an old theme. Being a part of the body of Christ is about a common faith (believing), grounded in the Word; a common identity (belonging), forged in worship; and a common way of life (behaving), carried out in the world. Each of these things informs and influences the others as facets of the whole. None of them can stand without the others.

So yes, Christians do need worship. In fact, our faith and life depend on it. To put it another way: through worship we come to have faith in the holy, triune God—on whom our lives depend.

4 What are the essentials of Christian worship?

This is a frequently asked question—and, to be honest, one that I don’t find particularly helpful. Too often, this kind of thinking leads to a deadly combination of liturgical minimalism and legalism—a short checklist of nonnegotiables. Pretty soon someone is asking, “What can we get away with omitting?” and “What’s the least we have to do to hold a valid service of worship?” And that’s not the kind of thinking that glorifies God or edifies God’s people.

Our Directory for Worship, part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order*, offers a better way to approach the matter.

Like a compass, the Directory for Worship orients us to primary things in the theology and practice of worship. (We use it together with a “map,” such as the *Book of Common Worship*, in order to navigate the landscape of the liturgy.) The opening chapter of the Directory for Worship provides a helpful overview of these primary things.

First, and fittingly, the Directory for Worship points to the grace and glory of the triune God (W-1.01). It emphasizes God’s initiative in worship and describes our participation as a response to God’s saving love. It underscores the church’s encounter with Jesus Christ in Word and sacrament. It shows how the Holy Spirit uses these gifts to illuminate and serve the nature and purpose of the church.

Second, the Directory for Worship explores the grand and cosmic themes of time, space, and matter (W-1.02) as they relate to Christian worship. We worship in time, devoting hours, days, and seasons to the Lord. We worship in space, setting aside particular places for an encounter with the Holy One. We worship with matter, using the good gifts of creation as signs of God’s grace and our gratitude.

Third, the Directory for Worship discusses human language, symbols, and culture (W-1.03). Christian worship relies on ordinary words to convey the wisdom and wonder of the God who is beyond our comprehension. Christian worship uses simple symbols as signs of God’s mighty and merciful work of salvation. Christian worship inhabits the challenge and complexity of human culture, just as God came to dwell among us in Jesus Christ.

As the Directory for Worship demonstrates, the real “essentials” of Christian worship are not elements of the liturgy, such as “confession and pardon,” “sermon,” “great thanksgiving,” or “blessing and charge.” The real essentials are so much bigger and more important—graceful acts of God and grateful human responses; cosmic gifts of God’s creation; living communities of faith and faithfulness. When we focus on these broader horizons, we are less likely to get lost in the weeds of minimalism and legalism. When we are oriented to these primary things, the other elements seem to fall into place.

5 What if there are some parts of worship I hate?

Christian worship was never intended to be a walk in the park, a ride on a roller coaster, or a day at the spa. There are always going to be parts of worship that challenge us, that we find less than thrilling, and that make us uncomfortable. That's the nature of the gospel—the message of Jesus Christ. That's the nature of the lives to which we are called as followers of Jesus. And that's the nature of worship.

But what if there are some parts of worship that deeply trouble you? What if there are elements in worship that make it hard for you to be open to God, true to yourself, and present with others? What should you do? Here are four suggestions, not necessarily in order of importance.

Engage in some honest reflection and self-examination about the source of the problem. Is there something in particular that is bothering you? Is there something that you're resisting? Where do these feelings come from? Ask God for insight and help.

Talk to others about these elements of the service. What do they enjoy or appreciate, and why? What do they struggle with, and why? Let their experience inform and perhaps expand your own.

Study the theology and practice of worship. Learn more about what is happening in the service and why. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a great resource called the Directory for Worship that offers clear, accessible descriptions of the patterns and purposes of the liturgy.

Ask questions of pastors, elders, and other worship planners and leaders. They may be grateful for the feedback and able to share some wisdom. They may even agree that there is room for improvement and help to identify a plan for addressing your concern.

Finally, remember that worship is a communal experience: we share in worship with the whole body of Christ. Something that is off-putting to you may be life-giving for others, and vice versa. Remember that worship is a lifelong practice: we experience

things differently in different seasons of life. Something that seems to drain you now may sustain you later. Above all, remember that worship isn't about individual preferences or personal satisfaction; it's about loving and serving God and one another in Jesus' name.