

A Brief Theology and Philosophy of Worship **University Reformed Church**

There is nothing more important in life than worship. We all worship something or someone. The only question is whether we will worship the right One in the right way. At URC we want all of life to be worship to God (Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 10:31). He is worthy to receive glory and honor and power (Rev. 4:11). In particular, we want our worship services on Sunday to be pleasing to Him. We want our corporate worship on Sunday to inspire and instruct our all-of-life worship Monday through Saturday. To gather with God's people on the Lord's Day to worship at God's throne under the authority of God's word is our solemn duty and joyful privilege.

It is with that supreme goal in mind that we hold to a number of values when it comes to corporate worship. The list below is far from comprehensive or complete. Rather, it is meant to provide a brief summary of the most important principles undergirding our theology and philosophy of worship. Please consult the numerous appendices to see many of these points spelled out in further detail.

1. Glory to God - Worship is ultimately for Him. He is the most important audience at every service. Corporate worship is meant to be an anticipation of the heavenly gathering of God's people. The grand scenes of heavenly worship in Revelation are both present and future. We too should direct all our attention to the throne. We too should sing of Christ's work. We too should be earnest and uncompromising in our devotion to God. Our weekly gatherings—whether small or large, beautiful or forgettable—are meant to be a sweet foretaste of the heavenly worship we will one day experience for ages unending.

2. Focused on the Gospel of Christ - The gospel—Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—is what makes worship possible. The gospel is what we proclaim in worship. The gospel is what we sing in worship. The gospel is what calls a people together in worship, inspires a people to praise in worship, and sends a people out in a life of worship. Every Sunday is another opportunity to sing about the cross, glory in our Redeemer, and marvel at the good news that is Christ for us and in us. Jesus Christ is at the center of all biblical thinking about worship. He is the mediator between God and man. His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross is the propitiation for our sins. He is the procurer of salvation and blessing for the nations. He is the new temple in which and around which all true believers gather. Christ draws us to himself in worship and through him a new relationship with the Father is made possible. While our corporate worship is not specifically focused on unbelievers (as if they were the audience we need to please most), our focus on Christ means that we certainly want the gospel presented credibly and intelligently to non-Christians. We are privileged to have visitors every Sunday, some of whom are not converted. One of our prayers each week is that unbelievers would hear Christ's call to faith and repentance, and that God would seek and save those who are lost.

3. Biblical - The whole service teaches God's people, so everything—the prayers, the songs, the preaching—must be biblical. In corporate worship we read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible in the sacraments. Every element in the service must be evaluated based on God's revelation in the Scriptures: are we singing, saying, and hearing what is true? Because of this conviction, we also affirm that “the acceptable way of worshipping the

true God is instituted by himself and so limited by his own revealed will” (WCF 21.1). This “regulative principle” should not be the source of endless conflict and idle speculation, but an opportunity for God’s people to find unity and freedom in worshiping God as he wants to be worshiped (See *Appendix 1: The Freedom of the Regulative Principle*).

4. Edifying to God’s people - Corporate worship is set apart from all-of-life worship in its focus on edification. Because of this focus, there are many activities that are appropriate for the Christian in all of life that aren’t appropriate in a worship service (See *Appendix 2: But Is It Edifying?*). There are many art forms that can be practiced and performed to the glory of God which would nevertheless not be suitable for corporate worship. Paul’s principle in 1 Corinthians 14 is that corporate worship must strive for maximum shared intelligibility. This means, among other things, that the worship service will not only be Word-centered, but also full of words (See *Appendix 3: Why So Many Words in Worship?*).

5. Emphasizing the ordinary means of grace - God can work in many ways, but he has committed to being with us and transforming us through certain “means of grace.” He communes with us through prayer, through the word, and through the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. Our services emphasize these ordinary means whereby God promises to give us more grace. We come to worship to give God glory, but even more so to meet with him and receive a blessing from his hand (Num. 6:24-26). The central act in the worship service is the preaching of God’s word. We believe this is best accomplished through the careful, Spirit-filled exposition of Scripture. Normally, this means working verse by verse through a book of the Bible. No matter the approach, every sermon should flow manifestly from Scripture and proclaim the gospel of God. Through all this, we hope that every worshiper will want to cry out, “Surely the Lord is in this place” (Gen. 28:16).

6. Congregational Singing – Choosing the appropriate musical composition and lyrical content for corporate worship is a task which requires careful attention to musical principles and even closer attention to theological fidelity (See *Appendix 4: Ten Principles for Church Song*). We believe there are new songs to be sung to Jesus. We also believe there is a great heritage of church music that we should embrace. We have no problem projecting words on a screen. But we also believe in the abiding value of using and learning from a good hymnal (See *Appendix 5: A Good Hymnal Is a Terrible Thing to Waste*). Our services use music from different genres and different centuries. We use a variety of instruments, everything from guitars and drums to the organ. In all this, the most important sound is that of the congregation singing (See *Appendix 6: The Sound of Silence*).

7. Liturgical (Worn Lightly) – Almost every church has an order of service and a familiar pattern of doing things, which means almost every church has a liturgy. Even though we wear our liturgy lightly, we still want it to be rich, rooted, and biblical. Our service has four parts: praise, renewal, proclamation, response. We see this pattern in the covenant renewal ceremonies of Scripture and in various divine encounters. In Isaiah 6, for example, Isaiah comes before God and praises him; then he confesses sin and seeks renewal; God then speaks his word to Isaiah; and finally Isaiah responds with commitment to God. This is also a gospel pattern: we approach God in awe, we see our sin, we hear the good news, and we respond in faith and obedience. Our services do not look the same every week, but neither are we trying to invent something new

every Sunday. Within these four “acts” (praise, renewal, proclamation, response) can be found basic liturgical elements like a prayer of confession and assurance of pardon, a long pastoral prayer, Scripture readings, and flexible forms used for Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

8. Reformed – The Church has been thinking about how to worship for centuries. We want to learn from our spiritual ancestors and build on their models. To that end, we are eager to employ the Ten Commandments, creeds, confessions, catechisms, responsive readings, and other forms that have been common in church history. We want our services to be comprised of more than an opening worship set, a sermon, and a closing song (See *Appendix 7: Is the New Evangelical Liturgy Really an Improvement?*). As a PCA church, we resonate with the guidelines outlined in *The Directory for the Worship of God (The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America, Chapters 47-63)*. We want our worship to be winsomely—that is to say, not archaically or obnoxiously—Reformed, rooted in history and true to the Scriptures (See *Appendix 8: What the Reformed Liturgical Heritage Has to Offer*).

9. Prayerful - Our services include many different prayers. Often you will find a prayer of confession because we sin every week and need gospel mercy every week (See *Appendix 9: Why We Need Confession of Sin*). We usually have a longer congregational prayer, which is an important time to pray for the needs of our church family and for the world. Other prayers are common too: a prayer of adoration at the beginning of the service, a prayer of illumination before the sermon, and a brief prayer after the sermon. We typically have a prayer service on the first Sunday evening of the month. It will be hard for God's people to know that they *must* pray, or see that they *can* pray, or learn *how* to pray if prayer is not a significant part of what we do when we gather for worship.

10. Undistracting Excellence – In corporate worship, the focus should be on the gospel and the all-surpassing glory of Jesus Christ. If the guitars are out of tune, and the sound system screeches, and the preacher fumbles over his sentences, and those leading up front make everyone else feel a bit nervous, then our focus will be in the wrong place. Because doing things decently and in order is helpful to others and pleasing to God, we should seek to “do worship” with excellence (1 Corinthians 14:40). But it must be *undistracting* excellence. If the guitarist goes off on some fantastic riff, and the sound system includes sub-woofers under every seat, and the preacher waxes overly eloquent, and those leading up front make everyone else feel a bit like they are enjoying a performance, then our focus will be equally in the wrong place. The goal is to lead in such a way that we are neither so clumsy nor so clever that the glory of God is all but forgotten.

Appendix 1

The Freedom of the Regulative Principle

Simply put, the regulative principle states that “the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself and so limited by his own revealed will” (WCF 21.1). In other words, corporate worship should be comprised of those elements we can show to be appropriate from the Bible. The regulative principle says, “Let’s worship God as he wants to be worshiped.” At its worst, this principle leads to constant friction and suspicion between believers. Christians beat each other up trying to discern exactly where the offering should go in the service or precisely which kinds of instruments have scriptural warrant. When we expect the New Testament to give a Levitical layout of the *one* liturgy that pleases God, we are asking the Bible a question it didn’t mean to answer. It is possible for the regulative principle to become a religion unto itself.

But the heart of the regulative principle is not about restriction. It is about freedom.

1. **Freedom from cultural captivity.** When corporate worship is largely left to our own designs we quickly find ourselves scrambling to keep up with the latest trends. The most important qualities become creativity, relevance, and newness. But of course, over time, what was fresh grows stale. We have to retool in order to capture the next demographic. Or learn to be content with settling in as a Boomer church or Gen X church.

2. **Freedom from constant battles over preferences.** The regulative principle does not completely eliminate the role of opinion and preference. Even within a conservative Reformed framework, worship leaders may disagree about musical style, transitions, volume, tempo, and many other factors. Conflict over preferences will remain even with the regulative principle. But it should be mitigated. Everyone has an idea that seems meaningful to them. The regulative principle doesn’t solve all our problems, but it is a nice strainer to catch some well-intentioned, but goofy ideas.

3. **Freedom of conscience.** Coming out of the Roman Catholic Church with its host of extra biblical rituals, newly established Protestant churches had to figure out how to worship in their own way. Some were comfortable keeping many of the elements of the Catholic Mass. Others associated those elements with a false religious system. They didn’t want to go back to the mess of rites they left behind, even if by themselves some rites didn’t seem all that harmful.

This was the dynamic that made the regulative principle so important. Reformed Christians said in effect, “We don’t want to ask our church members to do anything that would violate their consciences.” Maybe bowing here or a kiss there could be justified by some in their hearts, but what about those who found it idolatrous? Should they be asked to do something as an act of worship that Scripture never commands and their consciences won’t allow? This doesn’t mean Christians will like every song or appreciate every musical choice. But at least with the regulative principle we can come to worship knowing that nothing will be asked of us except that which can be shown to be true according to the Word of God.

4. **Freedom to be cross cultural.** It is unfortunate most people probably think worship according to the regulative principle is the hardest to transport to other cultures. And this may be true if the

regulative principle is mistakenly seen to dictate style as well as substance. But at its best, the regulative principle means we have simple services with singing, praying, reading, preaching, and sacraments—the kinds of services whose basic outline can “work” anywhere in the world.

5. Freedom to focus on the center. Usually when talking about corporate worship we don't even bring up the regulative principle. It is unknown to many and scary to others. It is easier to get at the same big idea from a different angle by saying something like this: “What do we know they did in their Christian worship services in the Bible? We know they sang the Bible. We know that preached the Bible. We know they prayed the Bible. We know they read the Bible. We know they saw the Bible in the sacraments. We don't see dramas or pet blessings or liturgical dance numbers. So why wouldn't we want to focus on everything we know they did in their services? Why try to improve on the elements we know were pleasing to God and practiced in the early church?” In other words, the regulative principle gives us the freedom to unapologetically to go back to basics. And stay there.

Appendix 2 But Is It Edifying?

One of the principles that sets apart corporate worship from all-of-life worship is the emphasis in the former on edification. This is not the same as asking “Do people like it?” Edification means more than preference. A particular element on Sunday morning may be fun, entertaining, and creative. It may use people’s gifts and be meaningful to some in the congregation. But if the element does not build up the whole body into maturity in Christ, then it is not appropriate. Corporate worship has different “rules” than the rest of life. What may be good as an act of private devotion, may not be fitting in a service of worship. We must ask, “Does this lead people to Christ and his word. Does this help them in holiness and increase their satisfaction in Christ?”

1 Corinthians 14 provides us with some helpful insights into the nature of edification in corporate worship. Paul here is trying to regulate tongue speaking in the worship service. He argues for the primacy of prophesy, and demands that when someone speaks in a tongue, there must be an accompanying interpretation (14:1, 4). Why? Because without an interpretation no one will understand the tongue speaker and the church will not be edified (14:2, 5). To be sure, the tongue speaker will be edified (14.4). He may have a powerful, inspiring experience, but in the gathered assembly Paul requires more than individually helpful experiences. He requires *corporate* edification.

In other words, our worship services must have maximum intelligibility. This principle of edification/intelligibility greatly limits use of the arts in worship. We say this for two reasons. First, in arguing for the use of intelligible words, Paul seems to be suggesting that understandable language is necessary for the building up of the body in corporate worship. If encountering God were only the goal, Paul would have let the tongues fly, but he put boundaries on their use because only intelligible language possesses the kind of shared meaning that is necessary for edifying worship. To be sure, language can be misunderstood as well, but compared with other communication forms, language has minimal ambiguity, greater precision, and more immediate intelligibility. If one of the aims in corporate worship is maximum clarity, then the use of the arts will be limited. It’s not that the arts have no value or that God cannot use the arts to affect us in powerful ways. They are valuable and they can be of immense spiritual good, but the arts (especially the visual arts) are by definition more open-ended, more inviting of different interpretations, less constrained by a recognizably shared meaning. This does not mean the arts are inferior to discursive sermons, it only means that they communicate in different ways which are less corporately edifying in a worship service.

The second reason we think the principle of edification limits the use of the arts in worship is fairly simple: every example of edifying content in 1 Corinthians 14 is a speech-activity. “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (14:26). We have no interest in demeaning the visual arts, but it is worth noting that when the Christians in Corinth met together in the gathered assembly to worship God and build each other up in the faith, they were to come with intelligible, edifying words. For this reason, our services do not include dance, drama, or the use of video clips (other than for an occasional announcement or missionary update).

Appendix 3

Why So Many Words in Worship?

Church services are sometimes criticized for being too propositional, too auditory, too, well, wordy. While it's true that worship services can be unnecessarily dull, this critique is misplaced.

Here are twenty-five reasons why verbal proclamation—through the reading, preaching, singing, and praying of the Bible and biblical truth—should have the preeminent place in corporate worship:

1. Faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:14-15). We cannot call on Jesus unless we believe in him and we cannot believe in him unless we hear of him from the lips of a herald. Faith begins with words.
2. God has chosen word-gifts and word-offices to build up the church (Eph. 4:11-12).
3. God creates through his word (cf. Gen. 1; Col. 1:16). God's work of creation is always a speech act.
4. God regenerates through his word. We are born again through the living and abiding word of God (1 Peter 1:23). And "word" here is not merely Jesus Christ, but the preaching Peter's audience had received (v. 25).
5. God's people are called to follow his commands and keep the laws. Jesus exhorted "if you love me, you will keep my commandments (John 14:15; cf. Deut. 11:1). We cannot love unless we are obedient and we cannot obey unless we are instructed in the law of the Lord. That is why the Psalmist not only rejoices in the person of God, but delights in his decrees and statutes (Psalm 119:16, 24).
6. Throughout the Bible, there is an unmistakable priority of hearing over sight. In distinction to the popular religions around them, God insisted that he was a God who would be unseen (cf. Exodus 20:3-4). When Moses asked to see God, the Lord refused, saying, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (33:20). Instead, God caused his goodness to pass in front of Moses by proclaiming his name—"Yahweh"—and declaring his character—"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (33:19). Biblical faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Heb. 11:1; cf. 1 Peter 1:8).
7. All the corporate worship we know of in the early church is saturated with words. While there are many things we don't know about the worship of the early church in the Bible, we do know that they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42). We know they were devoted to the public reading of Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13). We know they brought hymns, words of instruction, revelations, tongues and interpretations (1 Cor. 14:26). In other words, while we can make inferences and prudential judgments about the role of visual arts in worship, we know for certain that their gatherings were infused with words.

8. Jesus Christ is the preexistent, incarnate, eternal, Word of God (John 1:1). It is sometimes objected that our focus in worship is to be on the Word (Jesus) not the word (the Bible). This is surely true. We worship Christ not the Scriptures. But the argument goes too far if it places a wedge between the incarnate Word of God (Jesus) and the word of God (Scripture). We don't believe the Bible is Jesus Christ, but let us not miss the connection between the Word and the word. God created by means of the eternal Logos—his wisdom, his speech, his voice, his word. At the same time, we know that God created by and in Jesus Christ. Both truths demonstrate that the Logos is the mediating agent in all of creation and revelation, whether by means of the Divine Voice or incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ. In other words, the Word we see revealed and embodied in Jesus, is the same Word we meet in God's self-disclosure in the pages of Scripture.

9. Paul places a high value on maximum intelligibility in corporate worship (1 Cor. 14:1-25). There are times and places for ambiguity and subtlety. Corporate worship, however, is for proclamation. And words are the least ambiguous (though not always crystal-clear themselves) means by which the truth can be proclaimed. Dance can honor God, painting can praise our Maker, and music can please the Lord, but no other art form can proclaim the truth with as much shared intelligibility as words. Even the parables, which are often cited as encouragement for using stories and drama, were too ambiguous. That's why Jesus told parables: to be unclear. "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God," Jesus told his disciples, "but for those outside everything is in parables, so that 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven'" (Mark 4:11-12).

10. Jesus was a preacher: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43).

11. The church was founded on the teaching of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20; cf. John 16:13).

12. Teaching-preaching was a normative part of early Christian worship. The first Christians inherited from the Jews a strong tradition of teaching and preaching (cf. Acts 13:14-16; 15:21). From at least the time of Ezra, for example, we know that the Levites "helped the people to understand the Law." They "read from the book, from the law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (Nehemiah 8:7-8; cf. 2 Chronicles 15:3). We see this same emphasis in the New Testament church. Paul was preeminently a preacher (Ephesians 3:7-9). He commanded Timothy mainly to preach and teach (1 Tim. 4:13) and to instruct others in the same (2 Tim. 4:2). Titus' primary instructions are concerned with teaching what is in accord with sound doctrine (Titus 2:1). One of the main roles of the elder was to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; cf. Acts 6:2), so much so that "the elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). Clearly, the authoritative teaching and preaching of Scripture was a normative part of the early Christian gatherings, if not the central event of their meeting together.

13. We live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4).

14. The gospel is first of all news (Rom 10:15). Words must be central in corporate worship because the gospel is first and foremost a message—not an experience or an expression or even a command, but a declaration of good news.

15. Powerful emotional experiences come through Holy Spirit anointed preaching. Giving priority to the word, does not mean short-circuiting our affections. Our aim is not wise and persuasive words, but a demonstration of the Spirit's power, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words (1 Cor. 2:4, 13). True preaching does not simply fill our heads with knowledge, but removes the veil from our eyes (2 Cor. 4:3) and clearly portrays Christ crucified (Gal. 3:1).

16. The word of God is no dead letter. It is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow, and judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12; cf. Acts 2:37).

17. Transformation into Christ-likeness is not less than a mental-cognitive activity. We need words and truths in order that we might be transformed by the renewing of our minds and reach maturity in the knowledge of the Son of God (Romans 12:1-2; Eph. 4:13).

18. Jesus abides in us through his words. There is no rigid distinction between the person of the Jesus and the words of Jesus. We know Jesus through his words. "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you," Jesus tells his disciples, "ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7). For Jesus the two are interchangeable: remaining in him and his words remaining in us. When his words abide in us, we abide in him.

19. The promises of God sustain us in hard times. For example, the Psalmist says, "This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life" (Psalm 119:50). And, "If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction" (119:92). And "I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in your words" (119:147). Only the word of God has the power to keep us going when life grinds us down.

20. God has exalted above all things his name and his word (Psalm 138:2).

21. When all else passes away, the word of God will remain (Isa 40:7-8; 1 Peter 1:24-25).

22. Our only weapon in spiritual warfare is the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God (Eph. 6:10-18; Matt. 4:1-11). We fight the devil's temptations to disobedience and despair by claiming the promises of God and knowing who God declares us to be; that is, we resist the devil with words and by belief in God's words to us.

23. All of Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).

24. Through God's great and precious promises, we are able to participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Peter 1:4).

25. The Scriptures cannot be broken (John 10:35). There is much flexibility when it comes to corporate worship, but since we know that the Scriptures are inviolable, and that we are sanctified by the truth, and that the word is truth (John 17:17), we would be foolish if we did not make a priority that which we know has the power to save, transform, and endure.

Appendix 4

Ten Principles for Church Song

When it comes to singing on Sundays, churches have more options than ever before. From hymnals to Hillsong to homegrown creations, pastors and worship leaders have thousands of songs to choose from. A nice problem to have.

But still a problem. No music leader or pastor can keep up. No church can sing all the great hymns and all the latest greatest songs on the radio. No musician can excel in all the available styles. No leader can please all the people all the time.

The proliferation of choices often leads to conflict. Should we do hymns (Wesley, Watts, or Fanny Crosby?) or contemporary (70's folk music, early seeker service contemporary, or edgy punk rock?). Should our music have a Latin flavor or an African American feel? Should we use chants, chorale music, metrical psalms, jazz, country western, or bluegrass?

There are other questions too. What sort of instruments should we use? How much should cultural context come into play? Is there only one right kind of song to sing? If not, are there any wrong ways?

We can't possibly answer all those questions. But there are some general principles we can use to make wise decisions with our church music and congregational singing.

1. Love is indispensable to church singing that pleases God.

There are more important things than the kinds of songs we sing. Music should not be the glue that holds us together—the cross, the glory of Jesus Christ, the majesty of God, and love should. But even churches centered on the gospel disagree about music. So love is indispensable when we sing and when we are trying to discern what is best to sing.

John Calvin was right:

But because he [the Lord] did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these. Lastly, because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe. (*Inst.* IV.x.30)

Before we are quick to judge the lame songs some other Christians enjoy, remember C.S. Lewis' revelation. Listen to one of the century's most famous converts to Christianity talk about his early impression of church music:

I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit. (*God in the Dock*, 62)

We imagine the Apostle Paul, if he were writing to the church today, might have something to say about our worship style. "If I sing in style of the hippest music, but have not love, I am only a banging drum or a strumming guitar. If I have a gift for reading music and enjoy the richest hymns, but have not love, I am nothing. If I am discerning of excellent music and fine poetry, but have not love, I gain nothing." The first principle for singing as a congregation and choosing music for the congregation is love.

2. Our singing is for God's glory and the edification of the body of Christ.

God is the one we want to impress, the one we most want to honor. Our first aim must not be to win over the culture or appeal to the unregenerate. Worship is for the Worthy One.

Following closely on this priority is the goal of edification. The singing on Sunday morning should benefit God's people. This is a fair application of Paul's concerns in 1 Corinthians 14. It's also part and parcel of teaching and admonishing each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16). We should never approach the music as an entertaining lead-in to the sermon. Before you employ secular songs as your background music prior to the start of the service, consider whether a vaguely spiritual song from U2 will really build up the body of Christ.

Congregational song is part of the teaching ministry of the church. Church musicians and pastors should ask themselves: if our people learned their theology from our songs what would they know in twenty years about God, the cross, the resurrection, the offices of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, creation, justification, election, regeneration, the church, the sacraments, and all the other fundamental doctrines of the faith?

3. We ought to sing to the Lord new songs.

Isn't that a command? A command we haven't exhausted yet? There are still new songs to be sung to the Lord. What if the Church had stopped singing new songs in the 15th century? We wouldn't have "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." What if Christians stopped in the 16th century? No Charles Wesley. No Isaac Watts. What if the Church stopped a generation ago? No one would be singing "In Christ Alone" this Sunday. What a pity. Do we really think the last good song of praise to Jesus has been written?

4. Church singing should swim in its own history of church singing.

The metaphor is intentional. We should swim in this big ocean of church music, an ocean that is continually receiving new streams. We are not advocating a certain percentage of old v. new—every church will look and feel a little different, but we are suggesting that we should understand ourselves to be a part of this deep ocean of Christian song.

It's amazing that any church would consciously (or unconsciously for that matter) step completely out of the ocean of the historic hymnody and step into a wading pool of nothing but contemporary song. We're not saying newer songs are inferior to older ones (see previous point). What we are saying is that it is an expression of extreme hubris and folly to think we have nothing to gain from older songs and nothing to lose when we throw out the songs Christians have been singing for hundreds of years.

Think of what you get with a hymnal (whether it's an actual hymnal or the contents of the hymnal on your screen):

- *A link to history.* Our people, not to mention the world, needs to know that Christianity is not a novel invention. We sing in concert with two millennia of believers.
- *Diversity.* Churches using hymns are being exposed to a wider variety of Christian song than those who are exclusively contemporary. The hymnal has twenty centuries of styles: chants, folk tunes, ethnic tunes, carols, psalms, Welsh ballads, English melodies, stout German hymns, gospel tunes (black and white), and dozens of other musical variations.
- *Excellence.* Yes, there are some real clunkers in most hymnals. But by and large, the bad songs have been weeded out. If we are stilling singing a song five hundred years later it probably has strong lyrics, good poetry, and a singable tune.
- *The whole counsel of God.* Hymns give you a wide range of themes and biblical categories. Contemporary music is getting better in this regard, but the hymnal is still the best place to find a song on the ascension or the exaltation of Christ or a song of illumination or a lamentation or a communion hymn. Kudos to the Getty/Townend team and Sovereign Grace for trying to fill these kinds of gaps.

5. Sing the Psalms.

We are not convinced by the arguments for exclusive psalmody. But in 95% of our churches the problem is not that we are keeping out good non-Psalms. It's strange, even though we are commanded to sing Psalms and even though Psalms have been at the center of the Church's singing for centuries, still we easily ignore the 800 pound gorilla in the middle of our Bibles.

Jesus sang the Psalms (Matt. 26:30). The early church sang the Psalms. The Reformers, especially in the tradition of Calvin, loved to sing the Psalms and labored mightily to restore them to the church. The *Bay Psalm Book* was the first book printed in America. The Psalms—150 God-breathed songs—have been the staple of Protestant (and especially Reformed) worship

for 500 years. And yet how many of our churches sing a Psalm even once a month? There are exceptions, but by and large the evangelical church is bereft of Psalm singing. We might unknowingly stumble into one every now and again through Isaac Watts, but for the most part we don't think about singing Psalms; we don't plan to sing Psalms; and we don't sing Psalms.

Is there a command of Scripture we disobey more frequently, and with so little shame, as the injunction to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16)? The exegetical debate is not about whether these three terms refer to something other than biblical psalms, but whether they might all refer to different kinds of biblical psalms. Either way, God wants us to sing psalms.

6. We should strive for excellence in the musicality and the poetry of the songs we sing.

We are not for a moment suggesting elitism. A tune has to be relatively simple for hundreds or thousands of people to sing it at the same time. But we can still insist on undistracting excellence (to use Piper's phrase). We want the cross to be the stumbling block, not our poor musicianship or faltering power point.

While we believe a wide variety of styles can be used in worship, we are not musical relativists. Some songs are better than others. Some styles work better than others. And when it comes to lyrics, we should avoid obvious sloppiness like using thee and you in the same song or heaping up trite clichés. Worship leaders should try for something that doesn't sound like it came from a random page in your inspirational pocket calendar.

Some songs are simply deep and some are deeply simple, but there is a way to do both well. With so many songs to choose from, there's no reason churches can't make an effort to sing songs with some sense of poetry and musical integrity. The Hallelujah Chorus is repetitive, but it's musically interesting. Most songs, choruses, and verses aren't good enough to be repeated for very long.

7. The main sound to be heard in the worship music is the sound of the congregation singing.

Everyone is responsible to sing. The young girl with her hands in the air and the old man belting out the bass line. What people want to see in your worship is that you mean it. And no matter how chill or how reverent your worship is, if no one is singing, it's lame.

And if the main sound is to be the congregation singing, this will have implications for how we play and choose our songs.

- Is it singable? Pay attention to range (too high or too low), and beware of syncopation and lots of irregularities in the meter and rhythm. Make sure the melody makes some intuitive sense, especially if you don't have music to look at or people can't read music. When your guitar strums between G, C, and D there are a lot of notes to choose from.

- Is the instrumentation helping or inhibiting the congregation to sing? This means checking the volume. Is the music too soft to support the human voices? Is it so loud it's drowning them out? One mistake music teams make is to think that every instrument needs to be used with every song. Some songs should get the whole kitchen sink, but just because you have a drum, piano, guitar, bass, lyre, zither, flute, chicken shaker, banjo, cello, and djembe up there doesn't mean you have to use them all.
- Is the song (most of the time) familiar? People cannot handle a new song every week, let alone two or three new songs. Stick with your basic sound and core songs and go out from there. On occasion you may have to admit, "That's a great song, but I don't think we can do it well."

8. The congregation should also be stretched from time to time to learn new songs and broaden its musical horizons.

Every church will have a musical center. You should not reinvent the center every week. But you should not be enslaved to it either. We need to be stretched once a while, not only with a new song but a new kind of song—something from the African-America church (if you are a predominantly white church), or something from Africa or Latin America (with an English translation so it is intelligible), or something from the classical choral tradition. It's good to be reminded that belong to an ancient and global church and that every church service around the world does not need to look and feel just like ours.

9. The texts of our songs should be matched with fitting musicality and instrumentation.

Music should support the theme of the song. Different texts have different moods. The words for "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" would not work with the tune for "Children of the Heavenly Father." The campy song "Do Lord" does not quite capture the mood of the dying thief's final words. On the other hand, you have to love the Getty song "See What a Morning" where the triumphant, celebratory music perfectly matches the resurrection lyrics.

Musical style is not neutral, but it is elastic. Music conveys something. Some melodies are too syrupy or too raucous or too romantic. But styles are not rigid categories. There isn't a sharp line between contemporary and traditional, or classical and popular, or high culture and low culture. We don't have to make absolute rules about musical style, but we do need to be intelligent.

Perhaps this is a good place to say a word about organs. No church should die on this hill. Organs were originally associated with paganism. So there is nothing inherently spiritual about them. When they were introduced into churches, the average Christian in the Middle Ages knew as much about organs as your average teenager does today. They were introduced into worship not to be relevant, but because of the fitness of the instrument. As Harold Best argues in his terrific book, *Unceasing Worship*, there is no instrument we know of in the West better suited to support congregational singing (73). The organ fills in the cracks, provides an underneath sound, and encourages churches to sing louder and freer. We mustn't lay down any commands. But if an organ is an option for you, don't ditch it.

10. All of our songs should employ manifestly biblical lyrics.

We must start by asking of all our songs: is this true? Not just true, but accurate to the biblical text. For example, the old Third Day song “Consuming Fire” is true, but misuses the biblical text. According to the song, our God is a consuming fire because he reaches inside and melts our cold hearts of stone. That’s true, but the text in Hebrews is about God’s consuming fire of judgment.

Similarly, our songs should be manifestly true. That is, we shouldn’t have to put a spin on the lyrics to get them to be ok. We are looking for subtlety. We don’t want to sing songs that leave us wondering “what exactly does that mean?”

On the flip side, don’t be too hard on “I” songs. About 100 of the 150 Psalms have the word “I.” “I” is not the problem. The problem is with songs that are too colloquially, or use I thoughtlessly (I just want to praise you—well then praise him), or never move from how I am feeling about God to who God is and what he’s done to make me feel this way.

In all our songs we want to be teaching people about God. If we aren’t learning good theology and biblical truth from our songs, then either we don’t care much about our songs or we don’t care much about rich biblical truth, or both.

Appendix 5

A Good Hymnal Is a Terrible Thing to Waste

In his contribution to *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views*, Harold Best pens an eloquent defense of the spiritual and musical capabilities of the printed hymnbook. He explores eight reasons why “the best hymnbooks are treasure troves of theology, prayer, Scripture, song, hymnic information, stylistic variety, and liturgical opportunity.”

1. The hymnbook is a servant of the Word of God. “The hymnbook is, in its own way, a comprehensive exegetic work; it is metric theology. Over centuries of thought and practice, hymn writers have virtually left no topical or theological stone unturned. Hence, we can safely say that a properly compiled hymnbook is a primary and indispensable source for thinking and singing biblically” (66).

2. The hymnbook is remarkable diverse in style. The content, the styles, the meters, the range of simplicity and complexity, the full scope of human emotion—the hymnbook doesn’t just contain “hymns” as a fixed genre, but hundreds of hymns much more diverse than even the best selection of the best songs from the last twenty years.

3. The hymnbook is also musically diverse. “Two thousand years of musical evolution are offered: chant, psalmody, carols, folk tunes, ethnic tunes, curving Welsh ballads and hearty English melodies, Germanic stoutness, French clarity, early American forthrightness, gospel tunes (both black and white), nineteenth-century sweetness, twentieth- and twenty-first-century freshenings and asymmetries” (67).

4. The hymnbook thrives on hands-on printed material. “To the extent that many contemporary practices have overlooked the value of visual musical literacy and carry-around texts, and in a literal sense have reverted to preliterate oral tradition, they are failing—not just the church, but culture” (68).

5. The hymnbooks has been foundational in the history and development of choral music. “What is sung by the congregation, what is performed by choral ensembles or soloist(s), and what is played on instruments are kin to each other, discrete members of a large family, each of whom graces and welcomes the other” (68).

6. The hymnbook is a working history of the church’s response to God in worship. “As the Word of God is read in a worship service, the hymns in that same service talk back to the Word and onward to God in faithful concord. In this sense, congregational song joins prayer and homily in prophesying: It speaks up, speaks out, and speaks truth” (69).

7. The hymnbook is a tremendous tool for private devotions. “If the hymnbook suffers neglect in our times, it is not so much because shortsighted and thoughtless pastors and worship leaders have discarded it, but because it is sequestered away in sanctuaries and used only on Sundays. Over the course of a singing year, maybe twenty or thirty percent of its contents, give or take, will have been used. But give every parishoner a copy of a great hymnal and challenge each one to absorb and integrate its contents fully into an eager and farseeing devotional

regimen, and you will have a revival of interest, not just in hymn singing, but in the Lord himself” (70).

8. The hymnbook is scholarly and surprisingly flexible. “One of the joys of going through a good hymnbook is to peruse its Scripture readings and lectionaries, stories, prefaces, indices, creedal statements, and devotional commentaries, suggested orders of worship, and prayers. . . . A good hymnbook is also clever—or maybe we should say a good hymnbook in the hands of a clever worship leader is a remarkably flexible tool. Through the use of metrical and tune indices, new matchings of tunes and texts can be found that allow for variety and freshness” (71).

The bottom line: “Therefore, with the Word as the center of all church song, the hymnbook as its singable exegetic companion, and a significant body of hymn-related church music, we have a living organism that is virtually without parallel in the life of the church” (68).

Appendix 6 The Sound of Silence

*And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more.
People talking without speaking,
People hearing without listening,
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence.*

We assume Simon and Garfunkel weren't talking about church services, but it can cause some to wonder. Despite the Scriptural injunction to "admonish *one another* in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Col. 3:16) and the command to "address *one another* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19), it still is all too common to find churches that just don't sing. We don't mean there's no music whatsoever. There's usually plenty of music. Often lots of planning, lots of preparation, lots of time in the service devoted to singing. But congregational singing? Only "whispered in the sounds of silence."

This is almost an absolute rule: if you look around your congregation and people are barely singing, there is something wrong with your worship services.

One may be a church planting among unreached peoples having an exploratory service filled with non-Christians. But more often than not, even for the best missionaries and evangelists, most people in the weekly worship service are Christians, even if they are baby disciples or new converts. So for 99% of us, the rule is absolute: the sound of worship on Sunday morning should be loud with the sound of the congregation singing.

There are many reasons why people may not sing in corporate worship, all of which can be overcome with time, prayer, and careful planning.

1. The music is too loud. People are less likely to sing if they can't hear themselves, or anyone else near them, singing. Cranking the band (or the organ) up to 11 tells the congregation "You're not needed this morning."

2. The music is poor. Not all music is created equally. Some tunes are catchy, easy to sing, and powerfully support good lyrics. Other tunes are too hard, too bland, too syncopated, too high, or repetitive to be used to good effect.

3. The music is played poorly. People have a difficult time singing with confidence if the musical leadership is not competent. They might choose the wrong instrumentation (e.g., drums for a lilting hymn or the saxophone for a triumphant anthem). Or the guitar may inadvertently switch a 3/4 song into 4/4 because he can't figure out a different strumming pattern. And sometimes there is just too little energy, too little consistency, or too little sound (yes, the music can be too soft) to encourage congregational singing.

4. The aesthetics are not communal. Ideally, the sanctuary is laid out so that people can see other people. We are supposed to be singing, at least in part, to each other. Even if you can't rearrange your pews, you can think about other factors. For example, the worship leader having a special moment with the Lord may not actually be helping anyone else to have a special moment. Likewise, turning the lights nearly off encourages a privatized experience.

5. You are using too many new songs. One new song a month is pushing it for the most skilled and change-appreciative congregation. Two or three songs in one week is terribly unwise.

6. The people are not taught to sing. Many churches would do well to provide remedial instruction in reading music, using a hymnal, and understanding one or two things about music composition and instrumentation. More importantly, congregations need to know the spiritual reasons why we sing and why they should sing (even if they are not musically gifted).

7. The worship leader has become a master over the congregation not a servant. We would never hire a music leader who thought the band, the organ, the choir, or his new song was more important than the people singing heartfelt, biblical praises to God. It's a service of worship, not a concert, a performance, or a showcase for your musical talents.

8. The service is not planned well. This can take many forms—too many songs in a row, too disjointed, too much standing, too much sitting, no attention to flow or dynamics.

9. The people are spiritually immature. This is not necessarily a bad thing. You may have a congregation of new converts. People have to start somewhere. But if week after week, month after month, and year after year, the congregation barely sings, it may be a sign that in their hearts they have nothing much to sing about.

10. The church leadership doesn't care. If the pastor and worship leader are focused on numbers alone, or simply on the excellence of the band, the choir, or the organ, and not on the participation of the people, it's no wonder Sunday morning is filled with the sound of congregational silence. We can do better. The Bible tells us to, and God will be pleased when we do. As will the congregation when they experience the joy of singing so as to be heard.

Appendix 7

Is the New Evangelical Liturgy Really an Improvement?

Every church has a liturgy. Traditional congregations have a general order to worship. So do contemporary congregations. So do funky, artistic ones. Church leaders do not have time to reinvent their services every week. Congregations are not capable of learning new forms, new songs, and following a new order every week. Even the most spontaneous and creative church will flounder without some predictability and commonality from week to week. Even the most conscientious pastor or worship leader will eventually settle into a basic template for worship. Every church has a liturgy.

But not every liturgy is as good, or strong, or deep, or biblical, or gospel-centered as every other.

There is a New Evangelical Liturgy which is increasingly common in our churches. You find it in Baptist churches, Presbyterian churches, Reformed churches, free churches, and non-denominational churches. It's familiar in rural churches and city churches. It can be found in tiny churches and megachurches. No one has written it down in a service book. No council or denomination is demanding that it be done. No pastor is taught this liturgy in seminary (um, probably not). But it has become the default liturgy nonetheless. It looks like this:

- Casual welcome and announcements
- Stand up for 4-5 songs
- During the set, or at the very end, add a short prayer
- Sermon
- Closing song
- Dismissal

This is the basic liturgy from which most evangelical churches operate. To be sure, there are slight variations. The announcement may go after the praise set. There may be an offering in there somewhere, possibly with a special music number. The service may be tweaked a bit when there is communion or a baptism. But overall, if we were to visit 50 different evangelical churches over the next year, this is what we expect to find most of the time.

The simple question to ask is this: Is this New Evangelical Liturgy really an improvement?

We are not talking about instrumentation or worship style (though form is not irrelevant). And we are not suggesting God doesn't take pleasure when his people worship him in Spirit and in truth from all sorts of templates. We are not saying people won't be saved or edified in churches that use the New Evangelical Liturgy. We certainly are not saying they won't like it. What we are suggesting is that by no biblical or historical consideration can we conclude that the New Evangelical Liturgy is an improvement on the old liturgy.

What do we mean by the "old liturgy"? We mean the traditional Protestant order of worship that stretches back to Luther and Calvin (despite their important differences), runs through Westminster, and used to be what churches did when they didn't know what else to do. Was it

rote at times? Sure. Did some churches use it too rigidly? No doubt. But it was also a better default.

We're talking about an order of service that included a call to worship, multiple Scripture readings, Psalm singing (along with old hymns and new songs), a Scriptural benediction, historic rubrics like the Apostles' Creed and the Ten Commandments, and many kinds of prayers (e.g., invocation, prayer of adoration, prayer of confession, prayer of intercession, prayer for illumination). We are talking about what Mike Horton calls "the drama of Christ-centered worship" or what Bryan Chapell calls "gospel 're-representation'"—a carefully constructed, though flexible, liturgy which progresses with a distinct gospel logic: adoration, confession, assurance, thanksgiving, petition, instruction, charge, and blessing. The traditional Protestant liturgy has an Isaiah 6 movement to it where the gospel is not just preached in the sermon or even sung in the songs, but embodied in the entire order of the service.

For whatever appeal the New Evangelical Liturgy may have in American culture, and for whatever abuses or doldrums may be associated with a more traditional liturgy, we don't believe it can be argued, by objective measures, that the new is superior to the old. Which liturgy has more prayer? What one has more Scripture? Which one does more to accent sin and forgiveness? Which ones anchors us better in the ancient creeds and confessions of the church? Which one is the product of more sustained theological reflection? Which is more shaped by the gospel?

We are not sure where the New Evangelical Liturgy came from. Maybe its origins are in revivalist camp meetings. Maybe it goes back to the seeker movement. Maybe it's a reflection of the juvenilization of American Christianity. Maybe pastors have taken the basis pattern of Christian conferences and assumed it was meant to be the order for weekly worship. Wherever it came from, we encourage pastors, worship leaders, and churches to consider whether this New Evangelical Liturgy is the best we can do. It may be familiar. It may be simple. It may even be popular. And it may still not be an improvement.

Appendix 8

What the Reformed Liturgical Heritage Has to Offer

One of the best books on the historical genesis and theological reasons for Reformed worship is *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture* by Hughes Oliphant Old. His last chapter is a good summary of what the Reformed liturgical heritage has to offer American Protestants today. His prescriptions and warnings can be neatly outlined.

In considering what the Reformed liturgical heritage has to offer, we must avoid two extremes:

1. “The first is a sort of archaeological reconstruction in the English language of the Genevan Psalter or a meticulous following of the Westminster Directory for Worship” (161). What we need in the church today is reform not reconstruction. Some aspects of the older liturgies are not as helpful today (e.g., an ascetic attitude toward music, exclusive psalmody, long Communion exhortations).
2. “Liturgical romanticism is the other [extreme]” (165). By this, Old means “perpetual revolution in liturgical matters.” The motto “reformed and always reforming” does mean we constantly reconsider our theology and worship. This would defeat the whole purpose of having a tradition and a liturgy. We must have something to hand down, but this tradition can also be reinterpreted and reevaluated.

Reasons for maintaining the Reformed liturgical tradition:

1. “We human beings feel a need to keep in contact with our roots” (167). We need to know we are a part of something bigger and longer-lasting than ourselves.
2. “The tradition contains material of lasting value” (167). The Reformed tradition borrowed from the best of the Church Fathers as well as incorporating the best of the Reformers themselves. The Reformation was as much about worship as anything. The Reformers were great scholars and churchmen. Their insights into worship should not be quickly dismissed.
3. “We should maintain the tradition because it witnesses to the authority of Scripture” (170). The Fathers and the Reformers were steeped in Scripture, argued from Scripture, and filled their worship services with Scripture. The Reformed tradition is valuable only in so far as it bears witness to the Word of God.

Some of the most valuable liturgical traditions, rooted in Scripture, found within the Reformed heritage (172-176):

1. Expository preaching.
2. Verse by verse preaching (*lectio continua*).
3. Praying and singing of the psalms.
4. A full diet of prayer (e.g., praise, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, intercession).
5. A rediscovery of the Lord’s Supper as a covenantal meal.
6. An appreciation of the Lord’s Supper as eucharist (i.e. celebrating with thanksgiving and doxology).

7. An understanding of the epicletic nature of the Lord's Supper (i.e., we pray through Christ for the Holy Spirit to unite us, nourish us, and sanctify us at the Table).
8. An understanding of the diaconal nature of the Lord's Supper (e.g., taking an offering after Communion or emphasizing our call to serve others in the body of Christ).
9. The centrality of covenant theology in the administration of baptism.
10. One baptism for the forgiveness of sins; no secondary rites should be admitted.
11. Baptism is an initiatory sign of what happens to us through the whole of the Christian life.
12. Baptism should not be separated from discipleship (i.e., it should always entail the teaching of "all that I have commanded you" [Matt. 28:20]).
13. The emphasis on the daily service of morning and evening prayer.
14. The importance of family worship in the home.
15. "The greatest single contribution that the Reformed liturgical heritage can make to contemporary American Protestantism is its sense of the majesty and sovereignty of God, its sense of reverence and simple dignity, its conviction that worship must above all serve the praise of God" (176).

The concluding paragraph from Old is worth reading in full:

This program for the renewal of worship in American Protestant churches of today may not be exactly what everyone is looking for. In our evangelistic zeal we are looking for programs that will attract people. We think we have to put honey on the lip of the bitter cup of salvation. It is the story of the wedding of Cana all over again, but with this difference. At the crucial moment when the wine failed, we took matters into our own hands and used those five stone jars to mix up a batch of Kool-Aid instead. It seemed like a good solution in terms of our American culture. Unfortunately, all too soon the guests discovered the fraud. Alas! What are we to do now? How can we possibly minister to those who thirst for the real thing? There is but one thing to do, as Mary, the mother of Jesus, understood, so very well. You remember how the story goes. After presenting the problem to Jesus, Mary turned to the servants and said to them, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). The servants did just that, and the water was turned to wine, wine rich and mellow beyond anything they had ever tasted. (176)

At its worst, the Reformed liturgical heritage ends up being little more than an ill-fated attempt to live in the past by recreating the past. But at its best, Reformed worship is robustly biblical, thoughtfully theological, and compellingly doxological. It can be the rich and mellow wine most people have never tasted.

Appendix 9

Why We Need Confession of Sin

You often hear statements like this: “There is nothing you can do to make God love you more or to make him love you less.” And while it’s true that those who have been justified by grace through faith can never be more justified, we can hear a statement like this incorrectly. Yes, God loves us fully in Christ, but this does not mean we are incapable of doing things that are displeasing to God. We can get out of step with the Spirit. We can grieve him too. Even after we have been redeemed, our sin continues to be offensive to God. And this has an effect.

Think of adoption. You complete the paper work, pay the money and the child is yours. You are not sending him back. Never, ever, ever. In one sense, this new child can’t do anything to make you love him more or less. You will always love him deeply, more than he can possibly realize. But you can still get upset, still be offended, still be very pleased or very displeased. In the same way, God still notices our sin and it disrupts our fellowship with him.

That’s why we confess, privately and corporately. Confession of sin is one of the missing ingredients in the life of today’s Christian. We feel bad all the time, but often it’s over the wrong things. And when we do feel sorry for our sin, we don’t know what to do with it. We feel like we would be cheapening the blood of Christ if we confessed again. So we hesitate to repent. We feel bad, but we don’t confess and enjoy a clean conscience.

And even less frequently do we bewail our sins together on Sunday morning. This is a shame. If your church does not regularly confess sin and receive God’s assurance of pardon you are missing an essential element of corporate worship. It’s in the weekly prayer of confession that we experience the gospel. It’s here that we find punk kids and Ph.D.’s humbled together, admitting the same human nature. It’s here we, like Pilgrim, can unload our burden at the foot of the cross.

Some of us become Christians and just go on our merry way, never thinking of sin, while others fixate on our failings and suffer from despair. One person feels no conviction of sin; the other person feels no relief from sin. Neither of these habits should mark the Christian. The Christian should often feel conviction, confess, and be cleansed.

The cleansing, mind you, is not like the expunging of a guilty record before the judge. That’s already been accomplished. This cleansing is more like the scraping of barnacles off the hull of a ship so it can move freely again. We need confession of sin before God like a child needs to own up to her mistakes before Mom and Dad, not to earn God’s love, but to rest in it and know it more fully.

1 John 1:9, then, is not just about getting saved. It’s also about living as a saved person and enjoying it.