

Planning Worship with *Glory to God*

This is one in a series of articles introducing Glory to God, the new Presbyterian hymnal.

Introduction

“Hail thee, festival day! Blest day to be hallowed forever.” So begins the refrain of a fifty-five-stanza hymn dating to the sixth century (*Glory to God* #277). The author Venantius Fortunatus never intended all fifty-five stanzas to be sung as part of a single worship service; rather, different verses were to be selected for particular occasions. The verses remaining in widest use are those for Easter, the ascension, and Pentecost. But the broader point of such a hymn-of-many-stanzas is this: *every* occasion of worship is a festival day. Planning worship is thus like preparing a feast—a feast at which God is both the divine host and the guest of honor.

Much work goes into such planning. Ideally, however, tasks are shared by a group of people rather than all falling onto the shoulders of a solo and harried human host or hostess. Ideally as well, these tasks are performed in a spirit of love for the honoree and joy at bringing friends old and new together in a celebration that provides both sensory appeal and spiritual nourishment. But just

as guests at a dinner party come with differing dietary needs (vegetarian, low-sodium, no sugar, gluten-free), so those attending worship bring diverse needs to the occasion. Some long to be touched with a word of consolation; others, to be stretched by a theological question; still others, to be inspired by a prophetic call to action. For some, contemporary music with a driving beat will prove energizing; for others, old standard texts paired with long-loved tunes will provide reassurance

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that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Ultimately, though, it is not the preferences of the human participants that should preoccupy the festival planner; rather, the whole point of the party is to give glory to God.

A Balanced Menu

Glory is given in different ways on different occasions. In the secular year, a Thanksgiving feast on a crisp fall afternoon calls for a different menu than a picnic on a hot summer evening, and a Memorial Day observance has a different feel from a birthday party. Similarly, the church's liturgical calendar defines a cycle of seasons covering moods from somber to jubilant, restrained to triumphant. A marked innovation in *Glory to God* as a hymnal for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is its inclusion of a lectionary index in the back matter (pp. 968–978), suggesting hymns appropriate for each of the appointed readings of the three-year cycle—a real gift for worship planners seeking to provide a balanced spiritual menu. There are further liturgical suggestions for each Sunday, including a Scripture-based “Call to Worship” and a prayer of the day, available through the hymnal's online edition (at <http://www.thepresbyterianleader.com/Products/0664503373/glory-to-god-web-edition-30day-trial.aspx>; you will need to create an account in order to access it).

Such resources help to remind us that even the Sundays falling within so-called “ordinary time” in the church year remain festival days. Hence, while the worship planner and the party planner have yet another experience in common—after hours and hours of preparation, the feast they have given will be over in a fraction of the time!—for the worship planner, the challenge is even greater, because the next festival is only a week away.

Hymnal Helper

For this reason, worship planners need all the help they can get. A hymnal proves an invaluable resource, serving as a combination event planning guide, recipe book, and pantry of ingredients. *Glory to God*, whether used in its print or web-based edition, provides resources for churches large and small, whether they are practicing tradi-

tional or blended worship. Indeed, churches that practice exclusively “contemporary” worship can also find materials to enhance programs of music otherwise drawn from trending songs on praise charts or Christian radio.

In a presentation titled “The Nuts and Bolts of Worship Planning,” John Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, confirms that “worship planning—in ANY style!—requires a solid, balanced template or default pattern.”¹ Even a service that heavily accentuates spontaneity over structure will include time for offering our praise to God, hearing God's word to us, and extending our welcome to one another. Further elements of structure assure that the differing needs of worshipers are met through a menu reflecting more than the preferences of the planning team: needs for confession, lament, assurance, proclamation, affirmation of faith, commitment to service, Eucharist, and thanksgiving. These elements need not be practiced in an identical order or fashion week after week. However, a basic pattern that can be modified or embroidered upon offers a sense of continuity that instructs us in the constancy of God.

One such pattern appears in *Glory to God* in “The Service for the Lord's Day” (pp. 1–13). David Gambrell in the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has written in detail about this liturgy for the Presbyterian Leader series introducing the new hymnal. A point highlighted in his essay merits repeating: “The intent of these liturgies is not to dictate a set order of service but to provide one exemplary, accessible model for Reformed worship in the twenty-first century.”² Thus worship planners can look on the service outline as a kind of “hymnal helper” to which they can add their own distinctive ingredients.

The rubrics of the liturgy offer suggestions for such ingredients—“rubrics” being the texts printed in ruby-colored font, following a practice dating to medieval illuminated manuscripts

in which inscriptions in red ink told priests what to do at various points during worship. Depending on the customary balance of structure and spontaneity in a given congregation, different approaches may be taken toward using such liturgical instructions. A church preferring a high level of structure—or one that chooses not to print a weekly bulletin (whether for reasons of a small administrative staff or a large ecological consciousness)—may simply announce: “This week, we will follow the order of Service for the Lord’s Day in *Glory to God*, using option B for all responses.” A church that wants to blend a set structure with creative additions can supplement the sample order with specific passages from the *Book of Common Worship*, using page references from the rubrics to locate seasonally appropriate options. Alternately, the worship planning team may devise its own elements for principle components of the service.

Even a church with a high emphasis on spontaneity can find the rubrics useful. Since the days of Jesus’ first disciples, we have recognized our need for guidance in knowing how to pray. Perpetually threatened by self-focus, our spiritual life deepens with regular reminders to seek the Spirit’s leading in prayers for the topics listed in the rubric for “Prayers of the People:”

the church universal;
the local congregation;
the well-being of the earth;
peace and justice in the world;

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nations and leaders;
the local community;
the poor and oppressed;
the sick, bereaved, and lonely;
all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit;
other special needs.³

Further, whether or not Holy Communion is served or a formal liturgy is observed, the rubrics found under the celebration of Eucharist in “The Service for the Lord’s Day” guide us in offering thanks for:

God’s work in creation, providence, and covenant history;
the witness of the prophets;
God’s steadfast love in spite of human sin; . . .⁴
Jesus’ life and ministry;
his death and resurrection;
the promised coming of his reign . . .⁵

In short, the orders of service in the front of the hymnal school us in the practice of prayer in ways we can adapt to particular contexts, congregations, and worship styles.

Sung Prayers

Some congregations will even be drawn to prayers that are *sung* and not merely spoken. John Calvin endorses this practice in his preface to the *Genevan Psalter* of 1543:

As to public prayers, there are two kinds: the one consists of words alone; the other includes music. And this is no recent invention. For since the very beginning of the church it has been this way. . . . Nor does St. Paul himself speak only of prayer by word of mouth, but also of singing.⁶

The “Directory for Worship” of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order* lends further weight to Calvin’s endorsement, affirming that “song is a response which engages the whole self in prayer” (W-2.1003). Singing is a full-bodied activity, calling for deeper breathing than speech alone and more work from the muscles of the mouth and the diaphragm. Singing changes the rhythm of our heart rates and the chemical composition of our blood. It touches deep places within us, stirring us with the steadiness or acceleration of a beat, moving us with the rise and fall of pitch, evoking memories and awakening yearnings that cannot be captured by words alone.

Glory to God offers a rich array of short songs that can help to engage the whole self, whether as stand-alone prayers or as sung responses interwoven with speech. The lists below are intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

Responses to Confession

- Create in Me a Clean Heart (#422)
- Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God (#423)
- Search Me, O God (#426)
- Forgive Us, Lord (from a Spanish hymn) (#431)
- You Are the Lord, Giver of Mercy! (#437)
- Lord, Have Mercy (#551, #576, #577, #579)
- Holy Lamb of God (from Arab Christians) (#602)
- Lamb of God (#603, #604)

Prayers for Illumination

- Calm to the Waves (#184)
- Be Still and Know That I Am God (#414)
- Open the Eyes of My Heart (#452)
- Open Your Ears, O Faithful People (#453)
- Take the Saving Word of God (from Native Americans) (#454)
- Listen to the Word That God Has Spoken (#455)
- Thy Word Is a Lamp unto My Feet (#458)
- Give Us Light (from India) (#467)

Responses to Intercession

- Rain Down (#48)
- Wait for the Lord (#90)
- Holy Spirit, Come to Us (#281)
- Come, O Holy Spirit, Come (from Nigeria) (#283)
- Come and Fill Our Hearts (#466)
- Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying (#469)
- O Lord, Hear My Prayer (#471)
- Nothing Can Trouble (#820)
- Come, Bring Your Burdens to God (from South Africa) (#851)

Responses to Thanksgiving

- Raise a Song of Gladness (#155)
- Alleluia, Alleluia! Give Thanks (#240)
- Praise God, All You Nations (from Ghana) (#328)
- Praise, Praise, Praise the Lord! (from Cameroon) (#390)
- Bless the Lord, O My Soul (#535)
- Bless the Lord (#544)
- Our God Is an Awesome God (#616)
- In the Lord I’ll Be Ever Thankful (#654)

Reading through these lists further hints at how the pantry of ingredients in *Glory to God* can lend an international flavor to our festival days, enabling us to lift up our prayers in harmony with sisters and brothers around the globe and from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Spoken Songs

Just as prayers may be sung rather than spoken, so the words of songs may be spoken rather than sung. Using hymn texts as liturgical elements without their accompanying tunes can be a particularly effective means of introducing new songs to a congregation. After all, words we speak are easier to assimilate than words we sing, since attempting to fit syllables to notes can sometimes obscure meaning. (To verify this point,

stop and think about whether you have ever had the experience of singing your way through a new song and getting to the end only to wonder what it was you just sang about.)

Here is an example of a way to use the unaccompanied words of a text in worship. “Holy God, We Praise Your Name” (#4), while appearing in both the *Worshipbook* (1970) and *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990) is still not as well known among Presbyterian congregations as other hymns to the Trinity. Yet with its long history dating to the fifth century Latin *Te Deum laudamus*, it certainly merits wider acquaintance. Prior to expecting a congregation to sing it cold, excerpted phrases from the first stanza might be used at the beginning of the service:

Call to Worship

Holy God, we praise your name;
Lord of all, we bow before you.
All on earth your scepter claim;
all in heaven above adore you.

In like manner, the text of the fourth stanza could form a spoken prayer of the day or Trinitarian doxology at some other point during the service:

Prayer of the Day

Holy Father, Holy Son,
Holy Spirit: three we name you,
while in essence only one;
undivided God we claim you,
and adoring, bend the knee
while we own the mystery.

By the time the full hymn came to be sung (perhaps to close worship on the same or a subsequent Sunday), its words would seem familiar, and their meaning would shine through, even to the accompaniment of a less familiar tune.

Strategic Repetition and Symphonic Feel

In addition to serving as a teaching tool, using hymn texts as spoken liturgy can create coherence within a worship experience. Many services seem to jump from element to element because of a fill-in-the-blanks approach to a liturgical outline: insert a call to worship here, a prayer of confession there, and sandwich an opening hymn in between. But what if a bit more thought were given to making these elements relate to one another? For example:

Call to Worship

Leader: Come, thou Fount of every blessing;
tune our hearts to sing thy grace.
People: Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.

Opening Hymn

“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” (#475)

Call to Confession

“O to grace how great a debtor daily we’re constrained to be!”

Ye, God’s streams of mercy overflow for us
through Christ Jesus, who came into the world to
save sinners.

Trusting in God’s grace, let us confess our sin.

Strategic repetition of key words and phrases, creatively adapted from hymns and songs, can enhance worship with a sense of continuity and flow.

Not every element in a service, therefore, needs to be completely different from every other. Good worship planners and sermon writers, like good songwriters and visual artists, resist the temptation to put too many ideas into a single work. As the great worship and music scholar Erik Routley once wrote:

In this particular branch of art [sermon-writing], one of the disciplines is the actual fitting in of the composition to a conventional time slot, and the practitioner has to try to achieve the ability to speak for four minutes without being trivial or for forty without being boring . . . to resist the temptation to . . . the crowding of the score or the canvas . . . [to know] what to leave out, what to discard, what to leave for later treatments.⁷

Well-crafted and uncrowded worship thus has something of a symphonic feel to it: a theme is announced and then strategically repeated through a series of movements; variations on the theme appear with different moods and colorings; and a recapitulation of the theme emerges toward the end, bringing the whole (ideally) to a sense of satisfaction and completeness.

Balanced Novelty

Just as worship planners should not crowd the canvas with too many themes or ideas (or, to return to the worship-as-feast metaphor, load the table with so many dishes that guests are threatened with indigestion!), so we should not let either our attraction or resistance to novelty negatively affect those who have entrusted us with their spiritual nurture. Growth can happen only when the familiar offers a stable ground beneath our feet while the unfamiliar lures us to stretch forward. It is important to realize that a new hymnal does not call us to subtract the familiar but rather to add to and enrich it judiciously.

After all, every hymn was new once introduced, and the familiar ones were likely integrated well—which means in tandem with, rather than in place of, cherished oldies. Once-new hymns can become old favorites over time. Just as each congregation has its preferred balance of spontaneity and structure, so each will balance novelty and familiarity in distinctive ways. An average

congregation might reasonably be expected to learn ten to twelve new songs over the course of a year; for some, the number will be slightly lower, and for others, significantly higher.

Still, the point of incorporating new hymns or new practices into worship is never novelty for novelty's sake. Rather, it is novelty for the sake of honoring the Holy Spirit, who continues to inspire texts and tunes to the glory of God, who is "the ancient of everlasting days, and the Lord of the new creation."⁸ Because, when all is said and done (and sung!), this God is host and guest of honor at our festivals of praise.

Endnotes

1. Session presented at the Calvin Worship Symposium in 2003, repeated by popular demand in 2007, with full text available at <http://www.calvin.edu/cicw/microsites/worshipsymposiumorg/files/2007/witvliet-d.pdf>.
2. David Gambrell, "Liturgy in *Glory to God*," The Presbyterian Leader, 2; available for free download at <http://www.thepresbyterianleader.com/Products/PL0100/liturgy-in-iglory-to-godi.aspx>.
3. *Glory to God*, 7.
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
6. <http://www.reformedworship.org/author/john-calvin>.
7. Erik Routley, *The Divine Formula: A Book for Worshipers, Preachers, and Musicians, and All Who Celebrate the Mysteries* (Princeton, NJ: Prestige Publications, 1986), 39-40.
8. "Theological Vision Statement," *Glory to God*, 927.

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