

# **THE SERVICE FOR THE LORD'S DAY**

*Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

From its beginning, the Christian community has gathered on the first day of the week to hear the scriptures read and proclaimed and to celebrate the Lord's Supper. This day has special significance, since it was on "the first day of the week" that Jesus' followers discovered the empty tomb and met the risen Lord. The Lord's Day, Sunday, is therefore the very center of the church's calendar.

Gathered on the Lord's Day, Christians celebrate the age to come, which was revealed in the risen Christ, by remembering the words and deeds of Jesus and celebrating Christ's presence among us in the Word proclaimed and in the bread and cup of Holy Communion.

The Reformed order of worship for the Lord's Day takes its movement and elements from descriptions of early Christian gatherings found in the Gospels and in Acts. The order is a framework which allows for freedom and variety in liturgical action and affirms the people's role as active participants.

There are four parts to the Order of Worship: Gathering, The Word, The Eucharist (Thanksgiving) and Sending. Each month during 2005, the Sunday worship bulletin here at PRC will include a description of one or more of the elements of worship so that by the end of the year we had a small compendium for reference and distribution. Much of the information has been taken from *The Book of Common Worship*, published by Westminster John Knox Press in 1993.

## **GATHERING**

Worship begins with God. God takes the initiative and calls us into being. In the name of Christ we answer God's call and assemble as the community of faith. In the RCA, this first part of the service is called THE APPROACH TO GOD.

As we gather, we may informally greet each other as members of the household of faith. In preparation for worship, people may pray silently, engage in quiet meditation or consider the **Thought for Worship**. The music of the **Prelude** helps focus attention on God and the service which is about to begin.

The **Call to Worship** reminds us that our worship center in God and not in ourselves. Every week we begin with familiar words of the **Votum** (call): "Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth." Then **Sentences of Scripture**, usually from the Psalm of the day, are read or sung responsively, so that the whole congregation is caught up right away in the worship experience. The Call to Worship concludes with the **Salutation** - "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" - words used by Paul at the beginning of many of the Epistles.

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Words of **Welcome** follow naturally after the Salutation. Here some brief announcements pertaining to the life of the congregation are given, perhaps about mission, fellowship or education. The service then continues with the congregation singing of an opening hymn of praise telling of God's greatness, majesty, love and goodness.

The **Call to Confession** is an opportunity for the congregation to bow in humility before the God of grace and in the knowledge of the grace of God. We understand that the repentance we offer is not the cause of this grace because God's grace is ahead of our confession, already and always at work. In announcing God's mercy, the call to confession invites us to admit the brokenness in our lives.

**Confession** is made using a unison prayer. We lay before God not only those sins which may belong to us individually and personally, but also the sin of the congregation, the church universal, and the world. We confess the tragic brokenness of our human condition, in which, even without intending to, we are constantly running away from God and our neighbors. After the unison prayer, there is time for silent confession.

In the **Words of Assurance**, or Declaration of Pardon, we hear the gospel promises of God's redemption: God lays claim to all human life; Jesus Christ is the pledge of God's mercy and the hope and help for us sinners. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The power to forgive sin does not rest within the church or church leaders. The leader can declare it, but God gives it. We accept God's forgiveness, confident that in dying to sin on the cross, God through Jesus Christ raises us to new life.

A reading of the **Law of God** from Exodus or of the summary of the law from one of the Gospels has been a regular part of the Dutch Reformed tradition. The commandments are read after the Words of Assurance of God's pardon. As a forgiven people, set free from sin and death to live the Christian life, we turn to God's law as a guide and resource.

The **Gloria Patri** ("Glory to the Father") is the response to the promise of God's mercy and reconciliation. With respect and strong confidence we stand to sing our praise to the triune of God who created, redeemed and sustains us.

Reconciliation with God leads to reconciliation among the people of God. **Sharing the Peace** completes this theme of reconciliation, which began at the Call to Confession, by moving the congregation toward the exchange of reconciling words and gestures with one another. The Peace originated in the practice of the early Christians, who were accustomed to exchanging a "holy kiss" during the liturgy. The intention of Sharing the Peace is not to interrupt the service to engage in conversation and fellowship, but to speak to one another, friends and visitors alike, with an affirming word as members of the one body of Christ. At the end of the Peace, as we move back to our seats, we join in singing a song of welcoming inclusivity.

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Having gathered for worship, we have confessed our sins and been assured of God's forgiveness. We have shared the Peace of Christ with one another. The congregation is now prepared to hear the **Word of God** read from Holy Scripture, sung in hymn and anthem, and proclaimed in a sermon. In the Reformed Protestant tradition, the reading and proclamation of the Word is central to worship.

The **Prayer for Illumination** precedes the first reading from Scripture. We pray for the Holy Spirit to be at work in and among us, calling our hearts and minds to be attentive to what we are about to hear so that we may be transformed by it. The Spirit works to make ordinary words become the Living Word.

A **Children's Message** is included in the service just before the Prayer for Illumination. Children learn to worship by observing and participating in the liturgy, and up to this point they have been doing so with their parents. This special time now invites the children who are present to hear the same lesson told in a way more understandable to them. After the message, the children leave the sanctuary for Sunday school.

In the Reformed Protestant tradition, the reading and proclamation of the Word is central to worship. After the Prayer for Illumination, which reminds us that ordinary words are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word portion of the service continues in reading of Scripture, anthem, hymn and sermon.

The **Scripture readings** for the day are selected according to the *Revised Common Lectionary*, a three-year cycle of readings for each Lord's Day that include a psalm, a selection from the Old Testament or from Acts, an epistle reading and a Gospel passage. In this congregation, the psalm of the day is usually read as the Call to Worship and two of the other three lectionary selections are read during the Word. But occasionally, all the lectionary readings are included. The purpose of the lectionary is to provide for a disciplined use of the whole range of scripture in the church's worship. The readings for each Sunday follow each other closely so that a unified message for the day can be perceived.

Between the readings of scripture is music – congregational singing and choir anthem. **Hymns and anthems** are chosen to reflect the message of the day found in the Scripture readings. A mixture of familiar traditional hymns and one written more recently attest to the power of the Holy Spirit to speak across the ages through inspiring song.

Along with reading of Scripture, the proclamation in the **Sermon** is a hallmark of Reformed worship. The sermon may teach, edify, advocate or exhort, all good causes, and yet not the main purpose of preaching. The purpose of the Word is to realize that the Holy Spirit is at work making manifest Jesus

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Christ, the Living Word, in the midst of the congregation gathered for worship.

In the Reformed Order of Worship, the celebration of Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper, can be thought of in two ways. One, it is a continuation of the Word of God, the Word enacted in sacrament. Or two, as part of the Response to the Word, it is a great thanksgiving or Eucharist.

The meaning of the Lord's Supper is contained in the words remembrance, communion, and hope. The remembrance is of our Lord's passion on the cross and the resulting forgiveness of our sin; our communion is with our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ and the other members of that living body; and our hope is that as surely as we eat this bread and drink this wine, we will as surely be raised from the dead unto everlasting life, since Christ in his ascension promises that he will come again to make all things new.

The Lord's Supper is more than a reminder of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. It is a means, given to us by Christ himself, through which he is truly present as a continuing power and reality. While the meaning of Christ's sacrificial death is at the heart of this sacrament, it is a resurrected, living Christ whom we encounter through the bread and the wine.

The Lord's Supper is open to all who put their faith in Christ.

At Peapack Reformed, we celebrate Holy Communion on the first Sunday of every month. The elements are distributed to the congregation seated in the pews. We wait to partake until all have been served and then all commune together. In January and June, however, communion is served by intinction, or dipping, and individuals come forward to receive.

## **RESPONSE**

In response to the reading and proclamation of the Word, the congregation is called upon to act, to do something. This may be the celebration of Holy Communion (first Sunday of the month at PRC) or a pastoral rite of the church, such as reception of new members. Also included in the **Response** are an Affirmation of Faith, receiving the Offering and Prayers of the People.

The **Affirmation of Faith** most often recited at Peapack Reformed is the **Apostles' Creed**. The faith being affirmed is the faith of the whole ecumenical church catholic and orthodox as well as Reformed. Often the congregation knows this creed by heart; it is lodged in the memory and has worked its way into our inner being.

The **Offering** did not originate as a way of raising revenue for the church. In early centuries, Christians brought to the Lord's Day assembly gifts of bread and wine from their own tables. Some

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was used for Communion and the remainder distributed to the poor. Frequently, worshipers would also bring alms for the poor. Today, we are reminded that our offerings are dedicated to carrying out the missions of the church.

While the ushers are taking the Offering, the choir sings **Offertory** music, which is itself a prayer of dedication. As the offering plates are brought forward, the congregation rises to sing the **Doxology**, or words of praise, affirming that God alone is the source of all blessings. The pastor then offers a **Prayer of Dedication**.

The **Response** to the reading and proclamation of the Word continues with the **Prayers of the People**, here called **Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession**.

The congregation prays for worldwide and local concerns, including the church universal, the world and the nation, those in authority, the community, and people who are ill, in distress, or suffering in any way.

The Prayers include individual joys and concerns, which have been noted on blue prayer request cards placed in the offering plate earlier in the service. Included also is a long moment of silent prayer. At the close of the Prayers, the congregation together recites **The Lord's Prayer**. The choir provides a **Choral Response**, which brings this section of the worship service to a close.

### **THE SENDING**

The fourth and final movement of the Service for the Lord's Day is a transitional moment. The gathered assembly will break up and go back into the world, becoming apostles themselves, the "ones sent" to spread the gospel message. This part of the service begins with singing, usually an invigorating and energizing **Hymn** filled with purpose and dedication.

The **Charge and Benediction** then follows. In a few words, the Charge reminds the congregation of what they have heard in the sermon and encourages them to follow through, with the promise of God's support. The Benediction is God's blessing, a "good word" taken from the words of Holy Scripture. Holding a hand high, the minister offers the Benediction as a Laying on of Hands to those about to depart.

Following the Benediction, the congregation sits in a moment of quiet reflection, hearing the **Choral Response** and the chiming of the bell tones of the organ. Then comes the **Organ Postlude**. Some will stay and listen, while others begin to converse with one another as they move into Fellowship Hall for Coffee Hour.