

The Treasure of Reformed Worship

Rhett Dodson

February 1, 2009

A couple of months ago the moderator of our presbytery (Philadelphia Metro West, PCA) asked if I would participate in a series of monthly letters for 2009. The letters are to have a two-fold purpose. First, in order to get to know our fellow presbyters, the letter should be autobiographical. Second, it should also deal with a major topic regarding our Reformed heritage. I was asked to write about “The Treasure of Reformed Worship.” Oh, by the way, did I forget to mention that the letter was to be one page long? For those of you who know me, you can easily guess that I was stupid enough to say yes and charge in where angels fear to tread.

Since I’ve had very little time to write over these past few months, I thought I would take this opportunity to share the letter with you with the hope that it will encourage you as you worship the Lord. So, here it is—my life plus the biggest topic in the universe in 396 words:

As the newest member of presbytery, I’m grateful for the opportunity to participate in this series of letters. Originally from South Carolina, I was raised in a Christian home and made a profession faith as a teenager. My wife, Theresa, and I met when we were in graduate school and have been married for seventeen years. I was licensed to the ministry in May 1999 and ordained in October 2001 by the Free Presbyterian Church of North America. I served for eight years in Malvern, Pennsylvania.

My journey along the Genevan trail began as a teenager studying Paul’s letter to the Romans and books such as Steele and Thomas’ *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*. As I grew, I began to realize that to be Reformed meant more than embracing the doctrines of grace. It involved an entire outlook on life, one radically shaped (*re-formed*) by Scripture. In no facet of life is this truer than with regard to the worship of God.

Philip Benedict describes our Calvinistic heritage as a “dynamic faith” which has “at its core...the conviction that God’s holy word made clear the form of worship expected from his children.”¹ In worship we carry out the very work for which the Lord created us—to glorify and enjoy him. The Reformers, therefore, saw it as their duty to do in-depth biblical exegesis in order to distill the basic elements of worship in which we should engage. These include prayer, the reading and preaching of Scripture, the administration of the sacraments, singing praise, the presentation of our offerings, and the confession of our faith. Two of these elements, the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments, are the central characteristics of a true church.

Worship wars in church did not originate between pipe organs and electric guitars but between the accretions of tradition and the simplicity of the gospel message that declares,

¹ *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xv.

“For through [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:18 ESV). Beyond the dismissal of “smells and bells,” Reformed worship stresses the believer’s direct access to God through Christ in the Spirit. Correctly understood, every element of worship summons us to the experience of Trinitarian fellowship and evangelical joy. That is what makes our Reformed worship such a great treasure, one, like the gospel it proclaims, of inestimable value (Matt. 13:44).

©2009 Rhett P. Dodson