

Presbyterian Polity, Virtual Worship, and Resuming In-Person Gatherings

As discussion in our Presbytery have turned to when and how to resume in-person worship services, churches are considering the theological, ethical, economic, and political dimensions of the decision to resume. As Presbyterians, we first consider the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal,” and God’s Word to us. Further, we are “continually guided” by our Confessions, and the Book of Order governs all we do. Scripture is our starting point, therefore, for this conversation, which should not be guided by the world’s agendas and values but by God’s will. The following reflections on Scripture and the Book of Order are here to assist congregations in using these resources from our tradition to make decisions regarding worship.

Our Reformed tradition calls the Law of God a gift. The Law calls us to:

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.¹

The fourth commandment calls us to set aside a day of the week for rest, a holy day unto the Lord. God’s people in Old Testament times observed the Sabbath in their homes, traveling to the Temple for particular holy days and festivals. The joy of the people in coming to the Temple for these seasonal celebrations is captured in Psalm 122: “I was glad when they said to me, / Let us go to the house of the LORD!”²

In New Testament times, the early Christians began to worship on the first day of the week in celebration of the Resurrection. They worshiped both in homes and in places set aside for worship: “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts...”³ The book of Hebrews, an early Christian sermon later attributed to Paul, explains the importance of gathering for worship: “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,²⁵ not neglecting to meet together,

¹ Exodus 20:8-11, NRSV.

² Psalm 122:1 NRSV.

³ Acts 2:46, NRSV.

as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”⁴ The purpose of worship according to this text is:

- To provoke one another to love and good deeds
- To encourage one another
- To prepare for the Day of the Lord

Christians worked toward these purposes even when circumstances called them to be apart from one another. While there was no equivalent to today’s internet in New Testament times, the closest example from that time period was the practice of letter-writing. The New Testament contains more letters than any other form of writing. Paul did not “neglect” to remain in worshipful contact with the church, even when he was unable to be with them physically:

For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.⁵

Paul’s letters, in which he had more time in which to pour his thought, and which could be kept and shared in a way not possible with his face-to-face interactions, were thought more powerful than Paul’s sermons even by his own contemporaries. “For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.’” 2 Corinthians 10:10 NRSV. If Paul had neglected to send messages by text, we would have lost innumerable treasures of God’s Word that continue to speak to us today.

The Book of Order succinctly states the purpose of worship, consistent with our Reformed tradition: “Christian worship gives all glory and honor, praise and thanksgiving to the holy, triune God.”⁶ Worship is not entertainment, an opportunity to see and be seen, or a social hour. Although community is paramount, it is not the focus of our worship. Worship is simply a time to glorify God. In keeping with our tradition, the Book of Order declares that we can glorify God anywhere:

Because heaven and earth belong to God, we may worship in any space...The Gospels tell us that Jesus worshiped at the synagogue

⁴ Hebrews 10:24-25 NRSV.

⁵ Colossians 2:5 NRSV, *see also* 1 Corinthians 5:3. “Maybe the body of Christ has always been both virtual and physical...We are embodied beings and bodies can only be in one place. This is why St. Paul so often longs to be with the congregations from whom he is absent in the body. But notice what he doesn’t do: he doesn’t wait to offer them his words until he can be with them. He sends them letters. Letters meant to be read corporately, perhaps even to lead to worship or be part of it.” Jason Byassee, *For Virtual Theological Education*, FAITH AND LEADERSHIP, March 2, 2011.

⁶ W-1.0101.

and temple, but he also worshiped in the wilderness, on hillsides, and at lakeshores, demonstrating that God cannot be confined to any one place. The first Christians worshiped at the temple and in synagogues, homes, catacombs, and prisons. The important thing was not the place, but the gathering of Christ's body—the people of God—and the presence of Christ among them in Word and Sacrament.⁷

As many of our churches have lost members and even leaders to illness, minority and poor populations are disproportionately affected, and the effects of ending social distancing are still as yet unknown, churches might also reflect on the nucleus between worship and God's call to justice in society: "God sends the Church to work for justice in the world...overcoming disparities between rich and poor...We confess our participation in unjust systems, pray for an end to violence and injustice, offer our gifts to support Christ's liberating work, and commit ourselves to pursue peace and justice in Jesus' name."⁸ For these and other reasons, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly has advised that churches may elect to hold communion virtually.⁹

Ultimately, Scripture calls us to make decisions about in-person worship not based in fear, either fear of illness or fear of suspension of in-person services affecting the church's bottom line. Rather, let everything we do be done in love, with a special concern for the least of these among us.¹⁰

Grace and peace,

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⁷ W-1.0203.

⁸ W-5.0304.

⁹ J. Herbert Nelson, *Advisory Opinion: Communion in an Emergency/Pandemic*, March 24, 2020.

¹⁰ I Corinthians 16:14; Matthew 25:40.