

WHAT ARE THE KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING AND FULLY PARTICIPATING IN WORSHIP?

First, careful preparation of our hearts. We are naturally distracted; worship, though we are made for it, doesn't come easily, so we need to get ready for it by turning our attention from ordinary concerns to God and His Word. An important way to do that is by practicing the discipline of silence." The Lord is in His holy temple," said an Old Testament prophet; "let all the earth be silent before Him" (Habakkuk 2:20).

Second, recognizing that the worship service is a conversation between God and His people and entering into and focusing on that conversation, carefully listening to God and sincerely speaking to Him. The conversation generally follows a pattern something like this:

God initiates by calling us to worship through His Word. We then respond with a hymn or psalm and a prayer of adoration, followed by singing a song of praise to God. Then we both hear and speak His Word together through a responsive reading.

Then God speaks His law to us, reminding us of our duties to Him and our neighbors. As this law pricks our consciences, we respond by confessing our sins, both corporately and individually. God then graciously assures us that, as we have sincerely confessed to Him, our sins are forgiven, and we are cleansed to be in His presence. In response to God's forgiveness, we sing a hymn of praise and confess our faith in Him and our unity with the wider Body of Christ by means of a historic creed, confession, or catechism. God then calls us to prayer, and we respond by bringing our petitions before Him.

God then gives us the instruction we need for our faith and life. First He speaks His very Word to us as the preacher reads the Scriptures to us. During that reading, we stand to show our respect for the Word of God, and when it is finished, the preacher reminds us, "This is the Word of the Lord," to which we respond, "Thanks be to God!" Then God instructs us through the preacher's explanation of His Word in the sermon. We then respond in thanksgiving for God's instruction by presenting our tithes and offerings and singing His praises with the Doxology. God then, through the preacher, exhorts us to live by what we have learned, and we respond with a final hymn, often a hymn of dedication.

Finally, God blesses us through the benediction, and we then spend a few minutes quietly meditating on and praying about what we have learned before we leave to continue observing the Lord's Day with joyful feasting, celebration, and fellowship with other saints of the Lord, anticipating gathering again for worship at the end of the day.

Remember, "you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.' This expression, 'Yet once more,' denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:22-29)