

The Value of Responsive Readings in Worship

[May 8, 2015](#) by [Jim Fowler](#)

There were a number of factors that drew my family to Redeemer Fellowship in the fall of 2012; their statement of faith, the sermons we heard online, catching a glimpse of Pastor Joe Thorn's heart in *Note to Self*. But after sitting in the first worship service I knew we found our church home. Everything about the service was centered on the Gospel and Scripture. It is a blessing to be at a church that seeks to, as they say, "preach the Bible, read the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible" throughout the service.

Most churches focus on the preaching and singing of the Word and are content to show Scripture on a screen during a sermon, but at times the reading and praying of the Word is neglected to the detriment of the church body. The absence of the reading and praying of the Word is a lost opportunity for the growth of the believer as they read, ingest, process, and respond to the grace of God shown in Scripture. A helpful way to leverage the Scripture in corporate worship for good is in the form of responsive reading. Responsive reading is when a leader reads a portion of a text and the church body participates and joins in at another section of the text. (Another term used is "call and response.")

Responsive readings not only assist in the reading and praying of Scripture, but also are of value in that they are biblical, historical, participatory, and instructional for the life of the church.

Biblical

Worship is a response. When we gather together the body should be responding together as much as possible to God and his truth. We respond in worship as we sing songs of praise, partake of the Lord's Supper, and give of our tithes and offerings. The church body worships together as one when they respond to Scripture as one. Scripture itself points to examples of call and response that indicates a practice of responsive reading; Psalms 20 and 121 show an interchange between a leader and respondent. The biblical practice of responsive reading reoriented Israel in worship to the One True God and continues to reorient the church as Gospel truths are responded to in Worship.

Historical

We also see the use of responsive readings through the history of the church. The early church continued the practice of responsive signing/reading of Psalms and Hymns. James White writes, "Early Christian worship music was sung in unison. Many early writers consider this singing "with one voice" as itself a testimony to the unity of members within the body. The words could be both psalms and hymns, often sung responsorally."

Responsive reading or singing is rooted in the practice of the early church, a tradition that has been passed on to the church today. Not only did the early church practice it, but the protestant reformers did as well. In his pamphlet *Concerning the Order of Public Worship of 1523* Martin Luther prescribes the order of service for the church in Wittenberg and utilizes responsive readings during communion, Scripture, and benediction. John Calvin also utilized responsive readings in corporate worship. The tradition has continued throughout the life of the church. You can even find it in the back of Baptist Hymnals! They have contained responsive readings since they have been published.

Participatory

The practice of responsive reading encourages the congregation to cease being passive spectators but to be active participants in the service itself. Responsive reading is not an empty liturgy, but a living liturgy because it is a response to the living God who is with us. When done right responsive readings take an individual through the process of seeing their utter need of a Savior to running into the arms of their only Savior Jesus Christ. Throughout the process one is shown the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and cannot help but fall deeper in love.

Instructional

An important aspect of participation is instruction. While one listens/reads and responds, Gospel truth is being proclaimed and learned. Topics such as sin, depravity, atonement, justification, sanctification, resurrection, glorification, hope, are being heard, processed, and responded to. When done correctly, responsive reading should instruct and impact the congregation with the Gospel and are eventually memorized or embedded in the minds and hearts of the people.

Responsive readings not only assist in the reading and praying of Scripture, but also are of value in that they are biblical, historical, participatory, and instructional for the life of the church. They help to reorient and draw the church into a deeper love of God as they focus on the the character and work of our Triune God as revealed in Scripture. May we continue to “preach the Bible, read the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible” as we respond in worship to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Resources for Responsive Reading:

The Valley of Vision. A fantastic resource that is chocked-full of Scripture and Gospel Truth. This collection of Puritan prayers gets a lot of use at Redeemer Fellowship. (Get a copy here)

Gather God's People: Understand, Plan, and Lead Worship in Your Local Church. A brief instructional resource to help Pastors lead the people of God well in worship. It first sets a theology of worship before heading into planning and leading different aspects of worship from reading, praying and singing Scripture to ordinances.

Note that most hymnals have a responsive reading section in them.