

# Corporate Worship

by Micah McCormick

Worship dominates the pages of Scripture. Worship is so important that the scene of heaven's throne room portrays countless worshipers adoring the lamb (Rev 5:8-14). It stands to reason that God's people should be passionate about worship. And many are. Yet in today's world, Christians often think about worship in primarily individual terms. Worship is an experience that I have when I read my Bible or pray or sing along to Christian radio in the car. Sometimes "personal worship" is another way of speaking about "personal devotions"—disciplines of grace that transpire between a soul and God in the privacy of a bedroom or an office. These examples of individual worship should indeed be nurtured, and they form an integral part of Christian discipleship. Yet there is more.

Those who emphasize a close connection between faith and work will be quick to point out that personal worship should not be confined to occasional acts of devotion. Whatever is not from faith is sin (Rom 14:23), but that means that any act done in faith by a believer can be a righteous act—or we could say an act of worship. We are not called simply to pray before a meal or read a chapter of the Bible each day; we are each called to present our bodies as a kind of living sacrifice to God (Rom 12:1). Seen in this light, we should view everything we do as worship. For whether we eat or drink or manage a store or play frisbee, we should do all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).

But while I am eager to affirm individual worship and all-of-life worship, in this paper I wish to highlight corporate worship.<sup>1</sup> By corporate worship I don't mean worship that occurs in the context of a business corporation, but worship that occurs when a group of believers gathers

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Haykin observes that if you asked the average Christian today what is more important—private worship or corporate worship—they would likely answer private, whereas Christians of other eras like John Bunyan and Benjamin Keach would be just as quick to assume that although both were important, of course corporate worship is more important ("Contemporary Baptist Worship in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century," [<https://equip.sbts.edu/category/event/lectures/icw/page/3/>]).

together to give special attention to God and to his Word.<sup>2</sup> So we could also speak of “gathered worship” or “assembled worship” or “public worship.” Our minds most naturally turn to Sunday church, and rightfully so. What exactly is corporate worship? Why is it so important? What should be included in corporate worship? These are some of the questions I will explore from Scripture. With that said, here is a preliminary definition of corporate worship: *the covenant family of God assembling to give glory to God, responding wholeheartedly to the revelation of the Father through the mediation of the Son in the power of the Spirit.*

Psalm 29:2 offers a window into the center of Christian worship: “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness.” Hebrew poetry often develops through couplets, where the second line relates to the first line in some way. In this particular verse, it is likely that the second line is either a form of synonymous parallelism (where the second line says the same thing as the first line in a different way) or climactic parallelism (where the second line amplifies or builds on the idea/s in the first line). Either way, the structure of the verse closely links worshipping the Lord with ascribing glory to the Lord. The earth is full of the glory of the Lord, and worships acknowledges who he is and what he has done.<sup>3</sup> We marvel at his glorious beauty. In short, worship is *giving glory* to God.

In Scripture, worship is a *response* to God. We are mere creatures, and we should never presume to approach God or honor him in any way contrary to what he has revealed. In addition, as finite and sinful creatures, we should be all the more eager to recognize that we are utterly dependent on him to reveal himself to us. When Abraham receives God’s revelatory word, he worships with his son (Gen 22:5). When the people of Israel are given divine instructions regarding the Passover, they worship (Ex 12:27). When the reign of Christ is trumpeted in

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<sup>2</sup> Merriam Webster offers as one definition of corporate: “of, relating to, or formed into a unified body of individuals.” The Oxford English Dictionary definition includes: “involving or shared by all the members of a group,” and it even gives as an example, “a corporate act of worship in the College chapel.”

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer points out, “Worship must also be corporate, for one of the great things that God has done is precisely to form a people” (*Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church’s Worship, Witness, and Wisdom* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016], 119).

heaven, the twenty-four elders fall on their faces and worship God (Rev 11:15-18).

That picture of the elders falling facedown captures something of the consuming nature of worship. Worship should be *wholehearted*. It should be pure and sincere, not done in hypocrisy or with the goal of appearing holy in the eyes of men. Jesus chastises the Pharisees, borrowing the words of the prophet Isaiah: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me” (Matt 15:8-9). Merely going through the motions of church attendance or listless singing or keeping (mostly) awake during the sermon is a paltry substitute for earnestly seeking the Lord together with his people.

But once again, corporate worship as distinct from all-of-life worship and individual worship involves *assembling* with God’s people. Our English word “church” comes from the Greek word ἐκκλησία, which has the basic idea of an assembly. Gathering with the people of God requires intentionality, but we are richly rewarded, for God inhabits the praises of his people (Psalm 22:3).<sup>4</sup> Where two or three are gathered in his name, he is present in their midst (Matt 18:20). In the book of Acts, we find the early church regular in worship and regular in assembling—these two things go hand in hand.<sup>5</sup> In fact, to assemble without keeping worship at the forefront relegates the assembly to something less than the kind of Christian church that God intends.

The language of *covenant* attaches naturally to a discussion of corporate worship. All of creation declares the glory of God, but humans alone are made in his image. In Adam humanity has a relationship with God that is not merely creaturely but covenantal. Image-bearers have specific responsibilities to God and unique capacities to engage with him and enjoy him. Israel as

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<sup>4</sup> This is how the KJV renders it. The ESV and the CSB state that God is “enthroned on the praises of Israel.”

<sup>5</sup> Sometimes there are saints who are providentially hindered from assembling with God’s people, perhaps because of severe illness or other legitimate reasons. In missing corporate worship, they miss a tremendous blessing. Thankfully they too are saved by grace through faith alone, and their eternal destiny in the company of God’s people is safe and secure in Christ! Those not providentially hindered should take thoughtful care in how they can minister to such hurting and vulnerable people, whether through hospital visits or phone calls or other means of encouragement.

a nation had an additional opportunity to worship—an opportunity other nations didn't have—by virtue of the old covenant that God entered into with them. By God's sovereign grace they received “the adoption, the glory, the *covenants*, the giving of the law, the *worship*, and the promises” (Rom 9:4). In Christ we as new covenant people have even greater privileges of worship (Heb 12:18-29).

But while “covenant” captures the sovereignly imposed stipulations of our relationship to God and our service of worship to him, the contractual nature of a covenant doesn't in and of itself elaborate the full nature of that relationship. We need the language of *family*. Nebuchadnezzar imposed worship on his people (Dan 3:4-6), but what he mandated was merely the worship of subjects to their king. We do worship our Lord and King, but we worship a King who is our father, and we are his adopted children. The Lord's prayer, a regular feature of Christian worship throughout the centuries, begins “Our Father...” (Matt 6:9). When Paul addresses his letters to the churches, he uses family language time and time again. Those who worship are “brothers” (Php 3:1-3).<sup>6</sup> And this brings us to the great gospel realities at the heart of true Christian worship. We are estranged from God in our sin and can never find our way back to him, but he has rescued us. Christ has lived and died and risen for us, and he renews the heart of his bride so that we can indeed offer worship that is pleasing and acceptable to God, worship that turns from sin and worship that stems from hearts brimming with love, adoration, and a healthy reverential fear—not a petrified and servile fear.

Finally, corporate worship is thoroughly *trinitarian*.<sup>7</sup> God has revealed himself in Scripture in creation and redemption as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If we are to receive and

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<sup>6</sup> Of course there are a number of metaphors for the church in Scripture—bride, body, building, flock, etc. But even taken on the whole, it is noticeable how much those metaphors gravitate toward organic and relational devotion rather than toward technical prowess or managerial efficiency. C.S. Lewis affirms the sentiment: “I wish they'd remember that the charge to Peter was Feed my sheep, not Try experiments on my rats, or even, Teach my performing dog new tricks” (quoted in Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 246).

<sup>7</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old puts it like this: “Worship is the work of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ to the glory of the Father” (*Worship: Reformed according to Scripture* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox], 6).

respond appropriately to God's revelation, we must worship him together as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> Without the Father's eternal grace, we could never be restored as worshipers. Without the Son's accomplishment of redemption, we would remain hopelessly lost in idolatry. Without the Spirit's work to renew our hearts, we would remain blind to the beauty and glory of God. Even the worship we offer now as redeemed children takes a trinitarian shape, as we primarily address our father and yet pray in Jesus' name (John 14:13), while Paul reminds us that we worship "by the Spirit of God" (Php 3:3). In the book of Revelation, John is "in the Spirit on the Lord's Day (Rev 1:10) and witnesses the worship of the Father (Rev 4:11) and Son (Rev 5:9-10).

Perhaps the nature of the Trinity itself speaks something of the priority and power of corporate worship. God is not a solitary being. Rather, from all eternity past the Father and Son and Spirit share in a mutual glory and delight. We see this mutual adoration played out in a human theater in the baptism of Christ, when the Spirit descends on the Son and the Father declares that he is well pleased (Luke 3:22). Although the mediatorial work of the Son as the God-man occurs in human history, the Trinity shared in glory before the world existed (John 17:5). As people made in the image of God, why would we think that a solitary experience of worship is the pinnacle spiritual achievement? Although the relationship that we as individuals have with other Christians is different than the personal relations in the Trinity, God has designed us to function in concert with one another, and the symphony of corporate worship will reverberate into eternal ages. With this basic understanding of corporate worship in hand, I turn to a biblical theology of corporate worship, followed by the elements of corporate worship. Finally, I will give more focus to the purposes of worship.

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<sup>8</sup> Vanhoozer says that corporate worship is "drinking from the Trinitarian well" (*Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 122).

## A Biblical Theology of Corporate Worship

### *In Eden*

To tell the story of corporate worship is to tell the story of God’s design and our fulfillment, for we were made to worship God, and we were made to worship God together.<sup>9</sup> The Garden of Eden might seem like a strange place to begin, because God originally created one man and one woman, Adam and Eve. This arrangement sounds more like a biological family than a church family. But in Adam and Eve we have the prototype for what is to come. In Romans 5, Paul draws out Adam’s federal headship—he was ordained by God to be the representative for the whole human race, so that his actions, and in this case his disobedience, counts for us. In light of Adam’s representative role, we should note carefully what God instructed him, because Adam’s call was the original call for all humanity. Notably, Adam and Eve are portrayed as children of God. Luke’s genealogy expressly calls Adam a son of God (Luke 3:38). Adam and Eve’s son Seth was fathered in Adam’s “likeness,” after his “image,” echoing the language of Genesis 1 and implying that Adam and Eve are created in God’s image and likeness because they are children of God. Adam and Eve are called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen 1:28). God never intended one or two people or one or two families but a great company of worshipping image bearers.

Adam and Eve are royal children designed to exercise loving dominion in the earth. But they are also the first royal priesthood. Adam is placed in the garden to “work it and keep it”

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Gibson sketches an excellent biblical theology of worship in his “Worship: On Earth as It Is in Heaven” (in *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* [Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2018], eds. Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey), 1-22. Mike Cosper offers his own summary in *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church’s Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 25-72.

(Gen 2:15), verbs used together elsewhere of the priestly work in the temple (Num 3:7-8). Eden itself is a mountain sanctuary of God's holy presence, complete with cherubim just as the tabernacle had (Ezek 28:13-14). God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, a pattern later invoked as a rationale for the old covenant nation of God to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy (Exod 20:8-11). Adam and Eve were called as royal priestly children to fulfill their covenant with God, cultivating the earth and leading their posterity into the fullness of God's Sabbath rest. While we shouldn't neglect the domestic applications of the early pages of Genesis, we also shouldn't overlook the ecclesiological overtones of the narrative.<sup>10</sup>

The nature of worship sheds light on our parent's original sin. Instead of receiving and responding in praise and obedience to the revelatory word of their father, Adam and Eve tried to ascribe glory to themselves. Instead of worshipping God alone (Exod 34:14), they worshiped the creature more than the creator. Instead of wholehearted fulfillment of their design and destiny they discovered shame and alienation, not only for themselves but for the whole body of humanity. God remains as glorious and worthy as he ever was, but we come into the world estranged from him, and our hearts are idol factories, as Calvin says. After the fall, the next great sin is not first the act of murder or the attitude of anger. Instead, when Cain and Able together bring their "offerings" in worship to the Lord, God is not pleased with Cain's worship.<sup>11</sup>

### *In the old covenant*

When God revealed himself to Abraham and called him in grace, God promised Abraham many descendants, a land, and universal blessing. In the covenant promise, God was central—he was the great reward (Gen 15:1), and he was going to be a God to his people (Gen 17:7). The people of Israel grew and multiplied even amidst slavery in Egypt. They recapitulated the drama of Adam and Eve, emerging through the separation of waters and entering a glorious and fruitful

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<sup>10</sup> See G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Gove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Cospers, *Rhythms of Grace*, 40-41.

land. Not without significance is the nation of Israel called God's son (Exod 4:22-23; Deut 14:1; Jer 31:20). God once again creates a covenant family to experience communion with him.

At the heart of the exodus event is the priority of worship. When Moses confronts Pharaoh, he is to tell Pharaoh: "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me'" (Exod 4:22-23). The word עָבַד ("serve" in the ESV) often has connotations of worship.<sup>12</sup> Already God had said that Pharaoh should be told that the people were going out to "sacrifice to the Lord our God" (Exod 3:18), a request that is repeated (Exod 5:1, 3; 8:1). Moses dealt with fears, but at the end of the day he refused to waffle on worship. God redeems his children, his set apart and treasured ones, primarily for the purpose of worship. From a human vantage point, such a purpose might sound anticlimactic. But when we recognize union and communion with God as the greatest good of life, such a destiny radiates hope. Yes, the covenant family was to cultivate a promised land, and yes they were instructed to be a light to the nations, but first they were called to assemble and be still and know that Jahweh was their God.

Worship dominates the rest of the book of Exodus. God gives specific and detailed instructions about the construction of the tabernacle, but we should remember that this was the tent of worship, not some trade school for nomads. In all of these covenant instructions, the collective people of God are primarily in view. God does not have in mind primarily privatized worship but corporate worship. So Stephen refers to the "congregation<sup>13</sup> in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38). God descends on Sinai and reveals himself to all the people assembled before him (Exod 19:11). The same thing happens when Solomon constructs the temple in Jerusalem: "and it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and

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<sup>12</sup> Both the NIV and the CSB translate the word with "worship" here in Exodus 4, while the KJV uses the word "serve."

<sup>13</sup> The Greek word is ἐκκλησία, again the same word used over and over in the NT to refer to an assembly or "church." While there are important differences between the old covenant assembly of Israel and the new covenant assembly of God's people, corporate worship remains at the heart of both.



thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever,’ the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God” (2 Chron 5:13-14). After this Solomon speaks to the assembly (2 Chron 6:3).

The character of God takes center stage. He is creator and redeemer; his steadfast love endures forever; his glory fills the sanctuary. The old covenant people didn’t come in worship merely to receive moral instructions (though that was an integral aspect) but to be confronted by the consuming glory of God. Exod 33:10: “And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship.” The prayer of the worshipping body is the prayer of Moses: Lord, show me your glory.

Although old covenant worship among the people of God was indeed God-focused and corporate, it was also mediated and distanced. The people collectively could not ascend Sinai (Exod 19:12). Only Moses goes to the top (v.20). Trumpeting thunder sounds. Smoke shrouds the mountain in sacred mystery. The people tremble with fear. This is corporate worship east of Eden. “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.” (Hab 2:20). The people begin with a response of apparent reverence (Exod 19:8), but they end with idolatrous revelry (Exod 32:8), appointing their own mediator (Aaron) and exchanging the truth of God for a creaturely image (Rom 1:23). In fact, false worship becomes a dominant theme in the prophets (Is 44:15-17; Jer 1:16; Ezek 20:32), and the covenant family undergoes exile just as Adam and Eve did.

### *In the person and ministry of Christ*

The failure of God’s royal covenant children Adam and Eve was replicated throughout the history of Israel, and this failure was first a failure of worship. The weighty glory of God was esteemed lightly. Creatures were exalted and worshipped above the creator. In light of such repeated failure, the promise of God shines ever more brightly throughout the OT. He would

bring a curse reverser (Gen 3:15). He would put his king on the throne (Psalm 110:1). His own arm would work salvation (Is 59:16). He would change the heart and restore true worship (Ezek 36:26).

In the gospels, on first glance worship is not a particularly prominent theme, much less corporate worship. But such an assessment is actually short-sighted. In Christ, God came down from the heavenly throne room of Zion to reveal himself to humanity. If worship is a response to the revelation of the Father through the mediation of the Son, then we can expect no greater impetus for true worship than the grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ. The glorious character and heart of God was particularly revealed in Christ, for if we have seen him we have seen the Father (John 14:9). At the same time, Christ as the covenant head of his people perfectly embodies what it means to be a worshiper. As the God-man, he is worthy of all worship... while at the same time offering up the Amen of response to the invitation of the Father on behalf of his people. So Christ does more than exemplify heart-felt worship; he actually creates in himself one new man, redeeming sinners through the sacrifice of himself, giving us his own righteous record of heartfelt worship as the Son of God (Rom 5:15-19).

As we look into the life and ministry of Christ, we are confronted with the theme of worship at key points. A widow who represents the hope of the true remnant worships in the temple continually as she awaits the promised redeemer (Luke 2:37). The great Gentile sages of the east come and worship an infant, offering gifts to him (Matt 2:11). Toward the outset of Christ's public ministry, he is brought into the wilderness for 40 days and tested, calling to mind Israel's 40 years in the wilderness. But unlike Adam and Israel's idolatry, when the serpent tempted our Lord, Christ responded with God's own revelatory word, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Matt 4:10, quoting Deut 6:13). Jesus triumphs in temptation as the one filled with the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:1, 14). The theme of Christ as the faithful worshiper continues on as Jesus regularly goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath day

(Luke 4:16).<sup>14</sup>

Jesus cleanses the temple, the old covenant place of corporate worship, because it should be a “house of prayer” (Matt 21:13). But at the same time, he can say, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up,” speaking not of the earthly temple but of his own body (John 2:13-22). Jesus Christ is God’s final end time temple—he is the “place” where humanity and God intersect and he is the one through whom we worship. In one of the more extended conversations on worship, Jesus speaks with the woman at the well, explaining that worship cannot be separated from him—he himself provides the living water.<sup>15</sup> Much is made of the great commission, and rightly so. Jesus commissions his apostles, as God had instructed the twelve tribes of Israel—in the resurrection a new era of salvation history has arrived. And yet, before they go out to make disciples of the nations and witness God building his church, they come to the mountain to behold the glory of Christ and to worship (Matt 28:17). The ascension and enthronement of the true royal Son from heaven compels worship before it compels anything else (Luke 24:52).

The Bible provides a divine commentary on the narrative action of the gospels, and the book of Hebrews especially highlights the priestly service of our Lord. While the old covenant had regulations for worship (Heb 9:1), Christ himself is the great merciful and faithful high priest

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<sup>14</sup> B.B. Warfield observes, “Surely, if ever there was one who might justly plead that the common worship of the community had nothing to offer him it was the Lord Jesus Christ. But every Sabbath found him seated in his place among the worshipping people, and there was no act of stated worship which he felt himself entitled to discard. Even in his most exalted moods, and after his most elevating experiences, he quietly took his place with the rest of God’s people” (“The Religious Life of Theological Students,” a lecture delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1911).

<sup>15</sup> “I who speak to you am he” (John 4:26). Vanhoozer argues that “living water” refers both to truth (Prov 13:14) and Spirit (John 7:39), features which Christ will attribute to true worshipers (John 4:24). “Jesus too is looking for a bride at Jacob’s well, one who will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Jesus’ description of true worshipers is a description of the true church: the assembly of those who know God because they have been born again of the Spirit” (*Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 112). He goes on to maintain, “On [the] modern view, Jesus’ call for worship ‘in spirit and truth’ is a call for piety and sincerity: an inward, subjective quality of devotion. I disagree. Jesus is not contrasting external with internal worship. John 4 is not a Magna Carta for individuals who want to worship alone in private. The point is rather that the Father creates true worshipers by begetting them again in the Spirit. The Father is creating a house of worship, a new temple, in the form of a new people, the body of Christ” (116).

who offers himself in service to God, making propitiation for the covenant family (Heb 2:10-17). Christ himself brings in the everlasting Sabbath rest of worship (Heb 4). The old covenant regulations couldn't in and of themselves bring worshipers near to the heart of God, but the royal Son is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek, and his sacrifice is completed once and for all. Christ acted as a representative for his own, so corporate worship would not be possible apart from the work of Christ, any more than a body can be expected to provide service without a head.<sup>16</sup>

*In the new covenant*

If Christ is our representative, if he is the royal Son who is the true and great worshiper, if he is the brother who makes it possible for us to be adopted into the family of God, then it stands to reason that we cannot truly worship as God intends unless we are united to the Son. Jesus himself said that we cannot come to God unless we come through him (John 14:6). We give glory to God because there is one mediator (1 Tim 2:5) greater than Moses, and we are the very members of his body. Wrongful worship among the people of God stems from not holding fast to the head (Col 2:18-19). By faith the true seed of Abraham in the OT looked forward to the coming redeemer, and by faith the true seed of Abraham in "these last days" (Heb 1:2) between the advents of Christ still worships the Son who has come and accomplished redemption. The focal point of history is Christ himself, so we shouldn't rush from old covenant corporate worship to new covenant corporate worship apart from the fulfillment that the old covenant finds in Christ himself. The promises, the covenants, and the worship find their yes and amen in him (2 Cor 1:20).

When we do move forward to new covenant worship through Christ, Hebrews 12:18-24 offers a significant juxtaposition of old covenant and new covenant worship: "For you have not

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<sup>16</sup> Bob Kauflin writes, "There's nothing about our worship of God that isn't defined or affected by Jesus Christ" (*Worship Matters* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008], 70). Cospers affirms, "For the church, then, worship is participation in Jesus' own worship of the Father by the power of the Spirit" (*Rhythms of Grace*, 71).

come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.’ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’ But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly 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 that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” Truly there were times of great joy among the old covenant people of God (1 Kings 8:66; Psalm 100). And new covenant worship should retain reverence and awe since God is still a consuming fire (Heb 12:28-29). Nevertheless, on the whole, Hebrews suggests that the worship chorus has modulated from a minor key to a major key. The distance and darkness of Mount Sinai contrasts with the nearness and warmth of the heavenly Zion. The angels who delivered a law of threats and judgements are now decked with festal garments. The instruction and pattern for both new covenant and old covenant worship come from heaven itself (Exod 25:40; Heb 8:1-13), but in Christ the veil has been torn in two, and the outward ornaments have given way to clearer and deeper spiritual realities.

While new covenant worship is spiritual, simple, and celebratory, it is still thoroughly corporate.<sup>17</sup> In the old covenant, corporate worship had an ethnic and national dimension. Now the ascended king gathers a transnational people from every tribe and tongue and nation. The whole of Israel gathered together at Sinai to receive God’s Word and respond to him. The true Israel of God (Gal 6:16) now gathers in local assemblies, or “churches.” So Paul writes, for example, to the “churches of Galatia” (Gal 1:2). The book of Acts witnesses the expansion and multiplication of churches. We read of the simple and profoundly worshipful practices of those

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<sup>17</sup> Matt Merker observes, “Since salvation is corporate, worship is corporate” (*Corporate Worship* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021], 35). He doesn’t mean that we are justified as individuals by virtue of our connection to a group of people, but rather that God always saves individual people into his family.

churches: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42). People heard the preaching of the gospel and trusted Christ, but conversion inevitably led to inclusion. Renewed hearts led to a reconstituted body. Individual worship was never trumpeted as a monastic gold medal achieved by the most pious. Rather, people take hold of each other and say, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you” (Zech 8:23).<sup>18</sup>

When Paul stands before Felix, he confesses that he worships God according to “the way, which they call a sect” (Acts 24:14). After Saul is converted and filled with the Spirit and baptized, “for some days he was with the disciples” (Acts 9:19). Paul and Barnabas are sent off by the church of Antioch after worship and fasting (Acts 13:1-5). When Paul preaches to the unbelieving Athenians, he seeks to turn them to the worship of the true God (Acts 17:23-24). But this preaching for repentance and conversion should never be separated from his goal to see churches established. Evangelism and ecclesiology are not two separate themes in Acts. Rather, evangelism of individuals, families, and larger groups has the inevitable goal of an assembly of believers. And worship is a string which naturally brings both evangelism and ecclesiology together. When people receive new birth and see the glory of Christ, they worship, believing in their hearts and confessing with their mouths.<sup>19</sup> But the greatness of God is far more magnificent than any one believer could declare. Therefore, we naturally cling together as sheep in our Savior’s pasture. Early converts were “added to the church.” New covenant worship continues in true churches today, whether we assemble as thousands in a spacious auditorium or as a dozen in a small basement.

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Griffiths argues for a corporate worship accent in the book of Hebrews: “No doubt the writer intends the people to understand that they can approach God through Christ at any time and in any place; but the initial context of the appeal is to approach together, within the setting of corporate worship, in response to the proclamation of Christ from his word” (*Preaching in the New Testament* [Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017], 115).

<sup>19</sup> Vanhoozer comments, “The local church does not simply occupy space. It is a particular place where God’s love and truth are discovered, celebrated, and demonstrated (acted out in worship, witness, and wisdom)” (*Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 70).

Although the specific NT terms for worship<sup>20</sup> are not often used in the context of gathered worship, the concepts surrounding worship abound in assembly situations. The letter of 1 Corinthians provides an outstanding example. Paul writes this letter to “the church of God that is in Corinth,” and he describes them as saints who “call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:2). Frequently he instructs them about their behavior when they “come together” (11:18, 20, 33, 34; 14:23, 26). He warns them not to follow the idolatrous pattern of Israel (ch.10); he exhorts them about how they are to practice the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11); he gives them parameters for speaking God’s Word to one another together and exercising all manner of gifts to build up the body (1 Cor 12-14). This is the arena of corporate worship.

New covenant corporate worship is both highly universal and highly localized. It is universal in the sense that the times of ignorance have passed and the gospel is to go to the ends of the earth. But it is highly localized in the sense that worship and discipleship happen largely in the context of a concrete gathering of believers. No one is required to journey to Jerusalem. But neither are believers content to understand that their own individual body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. While this is true, believers throughout the NT are eager to regularly assemble in time and space in their local communities to worship their Lord together. The same Paul who fell to the ground before the Lord in his individual conversion made it his mission to help establish assemblies of saints who together offer the sacrifice of praise. In fact, the word “church” (ἐκκλησία) in the NT normally refers to a local assembly of believers, not to a building and rarely to scattered individual Christians who can never actually assemble together to worship.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The main two words are προσκυνέω, which has the idea of falling down or prostrating oneself as an act of worship, and λατρεύω, which speaks generally of “service” and can be used in a religious context to serve someone or something as an act of worship. Both words are used frequently, but not exclusively, in more individual contexts.

<sup>21</sup> The idea of online “church” undercuts the biblical norm of an assembly. Paul wrote letters and sent messengers—he participated in different Christian activities that were edifying without always being present in person. Yet he never assumed that remote correspondence replaced the local gathering. We can find all kinds of helpful aids for individual worship on the internet or other media outlets, but by definition we don’t find an adequate substitute for the church. To a lesser degree, but with the same principle in mind, it is a little confusing when people speak of various campuses or multiple services of their “church,” accepting the idea that people will never actually

*In the new Eden*

It might be tempting at this point to think that old covenant corporate worship does seem to have this one advantage over new covenant corporate worship—The Israelites all came together at Mount Sinai. The total unity of the people of God in their worship was visibly evident. While the new covenant is better than the old covenant in many ways (see the book of Hebrews), and while surely the lack of a central mecca for worship and the flexibility of localized gatherings helps to proliferate churches, in light of Christ’s prayer for his worshipping people to be one (John 17), doesn’t it appear a little anticlimactic to have countless small gatherings across the globe? Surely we can and should pray for one another, but we don’t experience corporate worship together.

The answer is not to abolish denominations and minimize doctrine and rent football stadiums so that our gatherings can be as large as physically possible. Rather, the answer is to recognize that in new covenant corporate worship we are living in the already-not yet. No, our assemblies are not yet all that Christ intends for his worshipping people. The earth has not been filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea as it will be one day (Hab 2:14). Every knee has not bowed to the Lord (Phil 2:10). We see through a glass darkly (1 Cor 13:12), and even as gospel people we don’t all agree on every particular of gathered worship.

But true local churches are harbingers of the future. Their worship, whether the quiet praise of eight Christians in a Chinese house church or the mighty chorus of a large Nashville assembly, constitutes the inbreaking of the new Eden into the present age. That is why the writer of Hebrews can say that we “have come” to “the heavenly Jerusalem,” to “the assembly [ἐκκλησία] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb 12:22-23). We gather and offer

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assemble together but they are still somehow part of the same “assembly.” In such a context it would seem that the unifying principle must be a popular pastor (who is broadcast in different places), or a style of music (contemporary vs traditional service), or the shared name and logo on the website or various buildings. But then the unifying principle is no longer a unified assembly of worshipping believers. Better to speak of such various services/campuses as various “churches,” and from there sort through what kind of relationship between them would be most biblical (formal or informal, shared or autonomous governance and budget, etc.).



acceptable worship to God through Christ, and we do have a spiritual unity with all the people of God. The Holy Spirit brings heaven down to us, or perhaps better (if even more mysterious), the Spirit brings us into the throne room of heaven itself. Our local gatherings of corporate worship anticipate a time when the people of God will all worship together in the new Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup>

And that brings us to the final stage of the Bible's development of corporate worship through redemptive history.<sup>23</sup> The book of Revelation, the final book of Holy Scripture, abounds with the language and imagery of corporate worship. Given how many echoes of Eden we see in the book, we find confirmation that God's intent from the very beginning was to create a people for his praise, a people who would delight in nothing more than together with one voice giving glory to the triune God.

When John is ushered into heaven, he sees four living creatures who never cease to cry out, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Rev 4:8). Twenty-four elders fall down and worship the one who lives forever and ever (4:10).<sup>24</sup> These elders sing a song to the lamb who is worthy "to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (Rev 5:12). John further encounters "a great multitude that no one could number," crying out, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and

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<sup>22</sup> Peter O'Brien suggests that this idea helps to explain why occasionally the word "church" can be used in the NT as a reference to the whole body of Christ, to all true Christians rather than to an actual local assembly. In such cases perhaps the writer has in view not merely their spiritual union with Christ but by implication their future actual assembly in the place where there is no need for a temple. See his thoughtful development in "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," in *The Church in the Bible in the World: An International Study*, ed. D.A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 88-119.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Horton stirringly summarizes, "Entering the heavenly Holy of Holies through the torn curtain of Jesus' body, we behold the New Eden's Tree of Life, Noah's rainbow, the divine flame walking alone between the sacrifice's severed halves, Abraham's circumcision, the blood on the doorpost, the true Israel's pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, the water and the blood flowing from the Messiah's side!.... Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!" (*A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centered Worship* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 122.)

<sup>24</sup> The four living creatures appear as rulers of their domains (ox as greatest of the domestic animals, lion as greatest of the wild animals, eagle as the greatest bird, and human as the ruler of God's creation), suggesting a composite picture of all creation praising God. The twenty-four elders call to mind the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples, perhaps representing the totality of the people of God. If this is the case then once again the scene reaffirms corporate worship as God's great goal in creation.

to the lamb” (7:9-10). The great judgment of God falls on the company of those who fail to give up false worship (9:20, 14:9-11).

The new Jerusalem is a garden city, a new Eden. The tree of life returns to center stage (22:2) and the Lord once again perfectly dwells with his people (21:3-4). God’s servants will see his face, and his name will be on our foreheads (22:4), and John writes simply yet profoundly, “his servants will worship him” (22:3). Scripture doesn’t tell us everything we may wish to know about the new creation. To what extent will we worship God with creative, animal-naming, all-of-life endeavors? To what extent can we anticipate individual “alone time” worship with our Savior? No doubt the Father has many eternal pleasures at his right hand, and we have eternity to enjoy them all. But one thing from the end of the story remains quite clear—worshipping God together in his presence with all of his people consummates the highest glory of God and our highest joy.

### **Elements of Corporate Worship**

Realizing the significance of corporate worship, what exactly should we do when we “come together as a church” (1 Cor 11:18) for worship? Throughout Scripture, we find consistency in the types of activities that God’s people engage in for corporate worship. There is development from the old covenant to the new covenant, especially when it comes to the signs of the covenant. But as it’s been said, God’s people read the Bible, preach the Bible, sing the Bible, pray the Bible, and see the Bible.<sup>25</sup> Since our worship is centered on the triune God, we would

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<sup>25</sup> Though the concept is certainly not original to him, I think Ligon Duncan is especially responsible for promoting this phrasing. See <https://ligonduncan.com/what-does-biblically-directed-and-informed-public-worship-look-like/>.

expect his revelation to inform and guide our worship.<sup>26</sup> God has not left us in our fallible and sinful humanity to contrive our own ways of worship. Rather, in his great love he has provided the map for our outposts of the new Eden, our assemblies of worship. Christians in history have often referred to this principle as the “regulative principle”—God regulates our corporate worship, and we are wisest to stick to his divine design.<sup>27</sup>

While individuals in Scripture are commended for creative battle plans and spontaneous counsel, nowhere is anyone commended for coming up with an idea for corporate worship. In the old covenant God’s people are told to craft their worship “according to the pattern that was shown” (Exod 24:40). Nadab and Abihu bring fire and incense, and we are told that they offer it “before the Lord” (Lev 10:10). Such a spontaneous offering of worship from priestly sons of Aaron sounds like a laudable gesture. Yet, we learn that this was “unauthorized” fire which the Lord “had not commanded” (10:1). As a result, “fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (Lev 10:2). The Lord speaks further, “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified” (v.3). We give glory to God when we obey him, and God-exalting, all-fulfilling corporate worship is sanctified by his Word.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Merker states, “God, by his Word, governs what the local church should do when it gathers” (*Corporate Worship*, 78).

<sup>27</sup> The regulative principle stands in contrast to the normative principle, which argues that as long as something is not explicitly forbidden in Scripture, it’s okay to include in corporate worship, whether or not it is positively commanded. The normative principle is usually associated with Lutheran churches, while the regulative principle is generally associated with churches springing from the Reformed branch of Protestantism. There is a sense in which for Luther, the normative principle did not come from an innovative impulse but rather from a conserving impulse—he didn’t want to cut out traditional ceremonies and practices unless it was imperative. And ironically today, many evangelical churches who would distance themselves from what they might describe as ceremonialism are yet the ones who take the most pride in worship innovations, in a sense moving even farther away from the Reformed regulative principle than Luther did.

<sup>28</sup> For more on the regulative principle see Ligon Duncan’s chapters in *Give Praise to God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003). Old offers this poetic prescription: “This program for the renewal of worship in American Protestant churches of today may not be exactly what everyone is looking for. In our evangelistic zeal we are looking for programs that will attract people. We think we have to put honey on the lip of the bitter cup of salvation. It is the story of the wedding of Cana all over again, but with this difference. At the crucial moment when the wine failed, we took matters into our own hands and used those five stones jars to mix up a batch of Kool-Aid instead. It

At the same time, we do want to exercise godly humility and charity. There is not as much specific detail in the new covenant as there is in the old covenant. Moses had a divine blueprint for an earthly tabernacle; our personal and living Savior has ascended to the true temple and left us with his Spirit.<sup>29</sup> Surely the same Spirit who inspired the OT inspired the NT, so we still do well to follow the instructions and examples given to us. Unfortunately, some Christians seem more distraught over what other churches shouldn't be doing than joyful about what they themselves can do. While the elements of corporate worship are graciously given to us by God, the form and circumstances of our corporate worship may vary from church to church.<sup>30</sup>

### *Reading Scripture*

If God has freed us from our own uncertainty and whimsy by telling us what to do when we gather for something as vital as worshipping him, then we would anticipate that reading and hearing his Word would be one of the first things that he would want us to do, and indeed it is.

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seemed like a good solution in terms of our American culture. Unfortunately, all too soon the guests discovered the fraud. Alas! What are we to do now? How can we possibly minister to those who thirst for the real thing? There is but one thing to do, as Mary, the mother of Jesus, understood so very well. You remember how the story goes. After presenting the problem to Jesus, Mary turned to the servants and said to them, 'Do whatever he tells you' (John 2:5). The servants did just that, and the water was turned into wine, wine rich and mellow beyond anything they had ever tasted before" (*Worship*, 176).

<sup>29</sup> The "blueprint" nature of old covenant tabernacle worship graduating to the greater freedom in new covenant worship is language used by Haykin. Bryan Chapell offers a similar assessment: "New Testament worship instruction lacks precise mechanics or intricate details. The biblical writers seem more concerned to have our hearts respond to the message of grace, rather than to compel us to honor it with scrupulous attention to some prescribed ceremony, wording, posture, music, decoration, and so on" (*Christ Centered Worship*, [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009] 108-109).

<sup>30</sup> For example, in the new covenant God continues to command his people to pray and we find clear examples of praying churches. However, we don't receive clear instruction on whether we should all stand when we pray, or whether we should kneel (as Anglicans often do), or whether we should be seated, or whether some may stand and others kneel as they wish. We don't have clear instruction on whether we should ever repeat set prayers like the Lord's Prayer, or whether we should prepare freshly thought-out written prayers, or whether we should pray extemporaneously, or whether we should include all of those styles of prayer. The general element of prayer is enjoined but not the form. Further, while we should maintain a spirit of prayer at all times (1 Thess 5:16), and while the early Christians seemed to have regular occasions of prayer (Acts 2:42 states that they devoted themselves to "the prayers"), we aren't explicitly told at what time of day churches should pray—that is a circumstance of worship that practically speaking must be agreed upon for corporate prayer, but whether a church gathers at sunrise or sunset or midday might depend on their own situation.

When the people gather at Mount Sinai, Moses “took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people” (Exod 24:7). At appointed times when the people came together, the priests were instructed to “read this law before all Israel in their hearing” (Deut 31:11). When the people come into the Promised Land, “There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them” (Josh 8:35). When reform is to take place, it begins with the public reading of Scripture (2 Kings 23:1-2; Neh 8:3-4). When our Lord emerges from his temptation and begins his public ministry, he goes to the synagogue and reads from the OT in the presence of all who are there (Luke 4:16-20). We think of Paul as a mighty preacher, and indeed he was, but apparently before he was invited to preach in the synagogues he waited for the reading of the law and the prophets (Acts 13:14-15).

The effusion of the Holy Spirit and growth of the NT church didn't bring with it a graduation from the grade school of Scripture reading. Just the opposite. When Paul writes to the Thessalonians, he puts them under oath to have the letter read to all the family of God (1 Thess 5:27). When he writes to the saints in the town of Colossae, he tells them, “And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans” (Col 4:16). When Paul writes to his dear son in the faith Timothy about “how one ought to behave in the household of God” (1 Tim 3:15), he urges him: “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim 4:13). Lest we think that Scripture reading is an act of worship done by the reader while others simply observe, Revelation further promises, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near” (Rev 1:3). Listening is a crucial component of corporate worship. We come from a world of chaotic noise, and how settling and enlivening it is to give of our ears an offering to the Lord, listening to God's Word together.

We should stress that Scripture reading is not a ritual that we maintain for tradition's sake. God commands it pointedly and repeatedly, and we simply take our stand in the tradition of those who have obeyed him. And once again his wisdom and his love provide this instruction.

How easy it is for us to forget or minimize his Word when that is what we most need! The church is the pillar and buttress of truth (1 Tim 3:15). But God's Word is truth (John 17:17). The whole of it can be summed up as pure truth (Psalm 119:60). So what better way for a church to guard the truth than to let God's Word ring out?<sup>31</sup>

God's Word is living (Heb 4:12). God is living and he continues to actively speak through his inspired Word.<sup>32</sup> Frequently in the book of Hebrews, an OT portion of Scripture is quoted, but it is introduced with an expression like, "as God is saying," or "as the Holy Spirit is saying," (e.g. Heb 3:7). God's Word is decidedly not simply like a dusty book in the library which may contain much wisdom that is applicable to the current day. It is a supernatural sword in the stone that has the power to kill and make alive. The Word brings spiritual life and creates worshipers and calls people out of the world and into the company of the redeemed.

In light of these eternal realities, it is tragic that Scripture reading is arguably the element of worship least attended to in many churches. Even in churches that do proclaim the good news that Christ has died for sinners, often Scripture reading is consigned to a few verses in conjunction with the sermon, almost as though the Bible is a wobbly stool that needs the support of an orator. And in churches that do give a bit more attention to reading Scripture, some congregants would confess in an honest moment that they find Scripture reading to be one of the more tedious and blasé parts of the service, and they hope it doesn't take too long. In Nehemiah Scripture is read publicly from "early morning to midday" (Neh 8:3).<sup>33</sup> Listen again to Paul's

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<sup>31</sup> Chapell identifies reading Scripture as "the very core" of corporate worship (*Christ-Centered Worship*, 220).

<sup>32</sup> Michael Horton reminds us, "God's work during the service is not just talk about God and the wonders he has wrought; it is yet another opportunity for God to work among us through the means he has ordained" (*A Better Way*, 25). What he says of preaching we could say of Scripture reading: "Too often preaching is primarily conceived as an event in which God is the topic but not the actor!" (38).

<sup>33</sup> Granted that old covenant seasons of revival are more occasional in nature, still the new covenant corporate worship assumption is that letters are read aloud in the assembly. It doesn't take half a day to read Thessalonians, but it takes more than thirty seconds. One of the practices of many early Protestant churches was to read continuously through portions of Scripture from service to service (Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 29). The

exhortation: “*Devote yourself* to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim 4:13). If we don’t live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt 4:4), then we are dangerously truncating our growth when we neglect to read Scripture.<sup>34</sup> But the wonderful news is that what we need to “liven up” our worship is already right in our hands, and we can simply receive it in faith!

### *Preaching the Word*

The Second Helvetic Confession (1564) boldly declares: “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.” On first blush this declaration appears dramatic at best and dangerous at worst. Scripture warns against anyone who would seek to add to it (Rev 21:18). False teachers preaching false gospels exist, and they should be rejected (Gal 1:9). Yet the point of this confession is not to give any mere human some kind of infallible papal authority, but rather to highlight the significance of true preaching. Jesus came for the purpose of preaching (Luke 4:43), and he sent his disciples out to preach (Luke 9:2). Throughout the book of Acts, preaching brings conversion and edification—preaching is a basic building block of the worshipping church. In Paul’s parting words to minister Timothy, he charges him “in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:1-2).

But what is preaching? It is more than explanation or exhortation, though it contains those things. In preaching, the preacher of the Word speaks on behalf of God. Insofar as an authorized herald accurately trumpets the truth of God’s Word, we can indeed say that the

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Westminster Assembly’s *Directory for Public Worship* also recommends this practice, suggesting one chapter from each testament in each service.

<sup>34</sup> Christians today will often lament the immaturity and weakness of Christianity. But sometimes in diagnosing the problem they cite wider cultural changes like “abandoning traditional values” or “removing the ten commandments from schools” without ever considering that their own assemblies don’t devote themselves to the public reading of Scripture.

preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. When Paul and his associates travel to Thessalonica, they proclaim Christ (Acts 17:3). Later when Paul writes under inspiration to the Thessalonians, he says, “We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:12-13). God’s calling is set in parallel form to Paul exhorting. More importantly, the Word heard from Paul and his associates (presuming large overlap with the proclamation recorded in Acts 17), was received as the Word of God—“what it really is.” The recipients of Hebrews are told to remember their leaders, “those who spoke to you the word of God” (Heb 13:7). In new covenant worship, God’s people should see that they do not refuse “him who is speaking” (Heb 12:25). The same God who spoke to Moses on the mountain is speaking through his appointed leaders to his covenant assemblies.<sup>35</sup> With this understanding of preaching, we can see even more clearly how all those who listen to preaching engage together in corporate worship, even though they are not the ones doing the preaching—they are actively, prayerfully, thoughtfully, and worshipfully receiving the voice of God among them.

Preaching is not so much a new revelation as it is an explication of God’s given revelation, living and respoken, as it were, by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the old covenant worship assembly, Ezra takes the book of the law and stands on a large wooden platform above the people and reads it to them (Ezra 8:1-6). Other Levites also read from the book of the law and “give the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (v.8).<sup>36</sup> Jesus proclaims the good news in the synagogue by declaring how the OT Scripture which was read aloud points to him

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<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Griffiths walks through a number of texts carefully showing the connection between the preacher’s words and God’s words (*Preaching in the New Testament*, 67-118).

<sup>36</sup> Early church leader John Chrysostom wanted his own congregation to “pick up... read, weigh, and understand” Scripture itself in conjunction with the public sermons (Gerald Bray, *Preaching the Word with John Chrysostom* [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020], 116).



(Luke 4:16-21). Paul tells Timothy to give himself to exhortation and teaching right on the heels of telling him to give himself to the public reading of Scripture (1 Tim 4:13), which again would flow most naturally if Timothy’s preaching to the Ephesian church is primarily “giving the sense” of the Scripture that is read.<sup>37</sup>

The longing of every preacher is to give messages “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,” just as Paul did (1 Cor 2:4)—and once again in this passage the speaker’s message is tied to the very power of God (v.5). But in some circles, it is a common practice for a minister to wait until the Holy Spirit “inspires” him to speak about a particular topic. Such preaching can still be faithful to the Bible, and perhaps we see something like this in the evangelistic preaching of Paul outside the church.<sup>38</sup> But it is more likely that in new covenant assemblies the regular preaching would have majored on something akin to what had happened in synagogue worship—Scriptures being systematically read and expounded upon.<sup>39</sup> Such a practice should never become a pedantic academic exercise. Rather, a prayerful longing for the power of the Spirit should express itself through careful study (1 Tim 4:15; 2 Tim 2:15) and through a recognition that the same Spirit who has already given us God’s Word (2 Pet 1:21) is the ultimate person who can speak through the human preacher to bring life.

A preacher is a herald, reporting the authoritative message of God.<sup>40</sup> Though not infallibly inspired, preaching stands in continuity with the prophets of old: “Thus saith the Lord.” Preaching is not improved in any age by relegating the message to a series of open-handed

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<sup>37</sup> We might include portions of historic creeds and confessions of faith in our worship as one way of “giving the sense” of Scripture’s teaching and acknowledging our union with the body of Christ triumphant.

<sup>38</sup> In Athens Paul’s spirit is stirred over the idolatry he sees, he reasons in the marketplace, and when he is invited to speak at the Aeropagus he gives a more or less topical sermon that begins with their objects of worship (Acts 17:16-34).

<sup>39</sup> See Old, *Worship*, 60-65.

<sup>40</sup> Three main words are used in the NT. καταγγέλλω has the sense of reporting or proclaiming. εὐαγγελίζω has the sense of spreading the good news, perhaps more with a focus on the content of what is shared. Finally, κηρύσσω brings out the heralding aspect of the preacher’s task. See a helpful summary in Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament*, 17-40.

suggestions or a kind of dialogue in which the listeners have the same speaking authority.<sup>41</sup> The preacher should himself be a worshiper,<sup>42</sup> consumed with the glory of God and the fire of God's Word, and the extent to which he soft-pedals God's message is the extent to which he fails to lead the people in worship. Rather than seeing a competition between the primacy of preaching and the other speaking gifts given to the worshipping body, the reading and preaching of Scripture becomes a fountain from which many streams flow.<sup>43</sup>

### *Baptism*

Baptisms often take place in church buildings and in connection with church services, but is baptism an act of corporate worship? Invariably one person is baptizing one other person, so what would make it corporate? We can understand receiving the read Word and the preached Word as participating worshipers, and we can certainly understand the Lord's Supper as corporate worship since we all partake together. But during a baptism, it is easy to assume that we are an audience who watches while one or perhaps two other people engage in some sort of

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<sup>41</sup> It should be added that preaching is not the only means of edification. Jesus loved to ask questions and have conversations, particularly in one-on-one settings and privately with his disciples. We don't know exactly what Paul's teaching "from house to house" looked like (Acts 20:20), but perhaps it was more informal and catechetical in nature. Some churches do promote public proclamation so much that perhaps they discount altogether small group inductive Bible study and other forms of collegial learning. However, I fear that today the poll more often swings too far the other way, and churches too easily let therapeutic affirmations substitute for preaching.

<sup>42</sup> See Old, *Worship*, 74. This theme of the preacher as worshiper is a central thesis in John Piper, *Expository Exultation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

<sup>43</sup> Griffiths notes how Paul publicly "teaches" and "admonishes" the Colossian Christians through his own preaching ministry (Col 1:28) and how they in turn should "teach" and "admonish" each other through singing (Col 3:16) [*Preaching in the New Testament*, 47]. Scripture speaks of the gift of pastor teachers (Eph 4:11), and nevertheless the "one another" commands are replete with encouragements to speak in all kinds of contexts. Part of "equipping the saints" is equipping them all to speak the truth to one another in love (Eph 4:25). As the Word of God reverberates out through public reading and preaching it echoes throughout the chamber of the body in our own interactions and life together, in turn strengthening the preachers themselves in their task. This mutual benefit can flourish as long as the importance of every member ministry doesn't overshadow and snuff out preaching. As Griffiths puts it: "The distinctive nature and significance of preaching suggest that the preaching of the word of God should drive and fuel the other word ministries within the church" (*Preaching in the New Testament*, 133). Piper agrees: "The preacher... makes no pretense that preaching is all people need.... Preaching is not everything, but it affects everything" (*Expository Exultation*, 307).

worship ritual. While traditions can grow up in and around church life that don't necessarily belong there, churches throughout history have good biblical grounding for connecting baptism to the assembly of worshipping believers.<sup>44</sup>

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus instructs his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them and teaching them. Throughout the NT, the church is a chief organ of teaching and discipleship, so it wouldn't be surprising if baptism flowed through the church—although Jesus doesn't explicitly say that here. However, he tells them that he has been given all authority on heaven and earth (Matt 28:18), and he tells them that baptism should be in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). Consequently, baptism is a naming ceremony that comes with the authority of the risen Christ. An adopted child is often given a new name to go with his new family, and his new family name becomes his public identity.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately the Lord infallibly knows those who are his and we don't. We don't change someone's heart or convert them through the act of baptism. And truly an individual becomes part of God's spiritual family the moment they are born again. But baptism publicly confers the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—or “Christian,” we might say in shorthand.

Keeping these things in mind, who has the (legal and divine) authority to confer such a status and privilege? Individuals don't baptize themselves. We can and should claim to be followers of Christ, but it is other Christians who acknowledge and ratify our claims. In Matthew 28 Jesus gives his apostles that authority. Those apostles are no longer around. However, we find a further clue in Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Here we have another reference to God's “name,” and in this case people are

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<sup>44</sup> Old notes that Martin Bucer was “particularly concerned that baptism be performed as part of the regular worship of the Christian congregation, rather than as a private service conducted for the family. Bucer understood baptism as the sacrament of our incorporation into the church, the body of Christ. If indeed this was the case, then the church should be assembled when baptism was celebrated” (*Worship*, 13).

<sup>45</sup> The Greek word εἰς can have the sense of “in” or “into,” and in Matthew 28:19 perhaps baptism “into” the name of the trinity better conveys the family transfer. We are not merely baptizing someone (one act) while we acknowledge that God has authorized us to do it—we are bestowing a new public family status on them in the act of baptism.

gathering in God's name. The broader context of Matthew 18 speaks of people agreeing on earth in behalf of heaven, and binding and loosing, echoing the language of Matthew 16:18-20.

Matthew 16 and 18 are the only two places that Matthew speaks of the "church." The people gathering in God's name (18:20) is another way of speaking about the church coming together to make a judicial declaration (18:17-18). Given the significant verbal and thematic overlap, we can conclude that just as Christ desired his disciples to help establish churches that would persist long after they died, he has authorized churches to be the institution that publicly names people as disciples of Christ through baptism.<sup>46</sup> We as local assemblies are participating in baptisms insofar as we affirm and bear witness to the reality of a person's confession of faith. We worship with the realization that the baptism is taking place on behalf of our authorized assembly.<sup>47</sup>

Thorough Bible readers might quickly object, "But wait, sometimes baptisms take place without an assembly in view. What about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch?!" The answer is that churches have to start somewhere. Missionaries cannot take their assemblies with them as they travel, so in new regions where there are no churches someone or some families will have to be baptized for the first time apart from an existing church. But even missionaries are "sent" (Rom 10:15), so we can still view such frontier baptism as authorized activity of a sending assembly.

Just as we bathe in order to cleanse ourselves, baptism is a picture of cleansing (Acts 22:16). We have been united to Jesus Christ (Rom 6:3-5), and our sins have been washed away by his blood. We are forgiven (Acts 22:16). This is possible because Jesus has been deluged in

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<sup>46</sup> For a more thorough exegetical treatment of these passages see Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Some traditions require an ordained minister to perform the baptism, while other traditions allow any member in good standing to perform a baptism. That question is beyond the scope of this paper, but the larger point here is that whoever is doing the baptizing is doing it on behalf of the assembly rather than from mere personal authority or whim. In addition, this understanding of corporate baptism is only one strand of evidence demonstrating that baptism is indeed an act of corporate worship. We as witnessing participants of a baptism can also together reflect on our own baptisms and the realities of the work of Christ that is signified.

the flood waters of God's wrath on our behalf (Luke 12:50; 1 Pet 3:21).<sup>48</sup> We are publicly named into God's family and united with the body only because we are first united with the head, Christ himself.

Because of this underlying truth, baptism is first of all a visible sign and seal of God's declaration and his work. He graciously nurtures our faith by vividly reminding us to turn away from ourselves and trust in his promise. The Father has promised to receive all those into his family who come in humble faith; Christ our brother has accomplished everything necessary for us, and the Holy Spirit has applied the work of Christ to us and renovated our hearts. But while baptism begins with assurance from God, like so many other elements of worship, baptism also affords an opportunity for us to respond with a worshipful "Amen" to all that God has promised. When people believe for themselves the content of the gospel, they are baptized (Acts 8:12). Paul is told to be baptized, "calling on" the Lord's name (Acts 22:16). God names us, and we publicly confess and own his name, as well as our commitment to live for him.<sup>49</sup>

In this respect baptism could be viewed as our first great act of public corporate worship. For it is in baptism that the visible *corpus* (body) of Christ receives us into its number (Acts 2:41), and we in turn pledge ourselves to Christ and to them. Such an occasion warrants the

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<sup>48</sup> This is one reason why immersion seems to be the normal and most appropriate mode of baptism. Baptism is in part a judgment ordeal where one is symbolically cut off in Christ, dying to the old way of life and born again into a new life, just as Israel passed through the waters with Moses while the Egyptians were overwhelmed by God's wrath (1 Cor 10:1-4). Burial customs do change from culture to culture (tomb vs. grave, etc.), but it is challenging to die by pouring or sprinkling in any culture. In addition, baptisms appear to take place "where there is plenty of water" (John 3:23). Finally, the word for baptism (βαπτίζω) and its cognates normally carries the idea of immersion. Some traditions go so far as to make immersion an essential and necessary part of the element of a legitimate baptism (*1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 29.4), rather than the most appropriate form.

<sup>49</sup> While we never want to discount the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit in even the youngest of children (Luke 1:39-45), infants can't publicly confess their faith. Better to follow the pattern of Scripture and baptize those sinners who personally own and publicly confess Christ as Lord. The deeper theological issue when it comes to paedobaptists and credobaptists is how we understand the old covenant and the new covenant. Baptism, like circumcision, is indeed a sign of the covenant, but the new covenant is different in nature and structure from the old covenant. See Stephen J. Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006, eds. Schreiner and Wright), pp.97-161. Although this puts it rather simplistically, the Israelites were born into the old covenant, while we are born again into the new covenant.

utmost collective joy and solemnity!<sup>50</sup> The gospel is enacted in dramatic form, and we behold with our eyes the wondrous mystery that is grasped by faith in the heart.<sup>51</sup>

### *Prayer*

In the reading of Scripture and the preaching of the Word most of the worshipping assembly participates by receiving. We are not listlessly passive, but we worship God by actively listening to and accepting his Word. Through baptism the gospel that has been proclaimed is dramatically symbolized, and we pass through the waters as an affirmation of all that God has promised and with our desire to be numbered among the worshipping family. Baptism occurs once, but prayer is a repeated opportunity to respond to the Word of God with our own words humbly directed back to him.

Most people talk easily and often, and yet many Christians struggle in prayer, even though prayer is a form of speech. And many find themselves even more reticent during corporate prayer. This is understandable on a human level since fear of public speaking usually ranks right up there with death on the list of people's greatest fears. But as with other elements of corporate worship, we have to remember that the person who happens to be speaking to God in prayer should not be the only one worshipping. We are not merely listening to someone else engage in heartfelt prayer; we ourselves join with them in our own spirits. If we don't hear and understand what is spoken or prayed, we are not in a position to say "Amen" (1 Cor 14:13-17). The presumption then is that we should all be prepared to "Amen" ("so be it!") the prayers that

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<sup>50</sup> In many cultural contexts people risk great persecution when they are baptized, at times being cut off from their earthly families and beaten or even killed. Such gravity underscores the nature of what it truly means to become a follower of Christ and publicly commit to him. Children's baptisms are a sensitive subject for many parents in the contemporary world, and the topic of the most prudential baptismal timing for those who grow up in the household of faith is beyond the scope of this paper. However, surely we lose something of the worshipful magnitude of this ordinance when churches treat baptism like a casual birthday party that can be entered into unadvisedly and lightly.

<sup>51</sup> Horton builds on the work of Meredith Kline, showing how baptism corresponds to circumcision as both a cutting off and a consecration (*A Better Way*, 95-104).

are offered since we ourselves are attending those prayers with patient and orderly attention and affirmation.<sup>52</sup>

In Matthew 6:6, when Jesus says, “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you,” he is not minimizing corporate prayer, much less abolishing it. In the context he is simply warning hypocrites not to pray with a view to being seen by others. In our day, what keeps many Christians from joining times of corporate prayer with their own voice is the fear that others actually will hear them! But in Scripture, when Christians assemble, prayer flows through all kinds of people. In the upper room after the ascension, “All these [eleven apostles] with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (Acts 1:14). They pray over Judas’ replacement (1:24). The Jerusalem Church devoted themselves to the prayers (Acts 2:42). “The church” offers earnest prayer to God for Peter (Acts 12:5). While public teaching in the church is to be done by men (1 Tim 2:11-13), and while Paul does seem especially keen to urge men to be willing to pray (1 Tim 2:8), the Bible also gives instructions for women as they pray in the assembly (1 Cor 11:2-17).

We find strength in the company of God’s people, and part of that strength is assistance in joint prayer. We might be tired and distracted, and often in our times of personal worship our minds wander. While of course this can happen during corporate prayer, we should come with even greater expectation that the Lord will be among his people (1 Cor 3:16), and that others can help us hold up our hands when we tire.

What should mark our corporate prayers? In Scripture, we find a wide variety of ingredients. In Nehemiah 9, the Levites leading the assembly in worship lift up their voice to bless God’s glorious name (v.5).<sup>53</sup> They praise him as the one true creator God (v.6). They praise

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<sup>52</sup> “Amen” is a common response among gathered worshipers (1 Chr 16:36; Neh 8:6; Rev 5:14; 19:4).

<sup>53</sup> According to William Perkins, the minister is the voice of God when he is preaching and the voice of the people when he is praying (quoted in Old, *Worship*, 79).

him for his character as a God of righteousness (v.8, 33), knowledge (v.10), and for his grace, mercy, and love (v.17). They rehearse the acts of God’s redemption (vv.9-15). They confess their sins (vv.26-35). They plead with God for favor (v.32). Praise, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication—these ingredients might not be present in every corporate prayer, but they are the categories of interest that appear over and over again. The Lord’s Prayer contains similar themes, and one thing that is sometimes lost is the nature of the disciples’ request: “Lord, teach *us* to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). Jesus responds, “When *you* [plural] pray...” (v.2). The Lord’s prayer can be taken up with great profit in the closet, but Christ’s pattern seems applicable first to this reconstituted Israelite twelve and their spiritual offspring—the churches of the NT.

When we pray together as assembled worshipers, the triune God takes center stage. We direct our prayer to God, praying to the Father (Luke 11:2), in the Spirit (Eph 6:18), in the name of Christ (John 14:13).<sup>54</sup> This point must be stressed, that as in all worship, God is the great object. And in prayer, he should be the chief subject. Christians all too often come together for prayer recognizing that they are addressing God, but they rush in to address him about a host of other subjects, in reality minimizing his centrality and glory and giving the impression that what they are really devoted to is whatever other thing they happened to be praying about. Jesus gives us great freedom to pray about any number of things (Matt 7:7-11; James 1:5; 1 Tim 2:1-2; 1 Pet 5:6-7), so I’m not suggesting that there are things we shouldn’t pray about. But supplication is only one feature of prayer, and even when we petition God regarding some circumstantial trial or decision, we should pray in a way that gives priority to redemptive concerns. To offer one example from the OT, in 2 Chronicles 20, Jehoshaphat is told that a great army is coming to attack. Jehoshaphat stands “in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem” (v.5) and prays on behalf of the nation. He announces that God is ruling from heaven (v.6). He rehearses God’s great acts in

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<sup>54</sup> Old summarizes the trinitarian prayer reflection of 19<sup>th</sup> century minister Benjamin Palmer—“Prayer has to do with the providential care of the Father for his children, the intercessory ministry of the risen and ascended Son at the right hand of the Father, and the illuminating ministry of the Spirit” (*Worship*, 106).



the past (v.7).<sup>55</sup> He invokes the name of God which is “in this house” (v.9). He confesses the people’s inadequacy but hastens to add “our eyes are on you” (v.12).<sup>56</sup>

Historically, many churches have found it helpful to set aside different parts of the corporate worship service for different types of prayers.<sup>57</sup> For example, looking through Reformation era liturgies one might find a prayer of invocation, a prayer of preparation, a prayer over the offerings and gifts, recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, a prayer of confession,<sup>58</sup> a prayer of illumination, prayers of intercessions, prayer for strength, prayer for forgiveness, prayer for the poor, prayer of petition, prayer of thanksgiving, prayer of consecration, prayer for the church, concluding prayer, and more.<sup>59</sup> Not all of these prayers are included in every order of worship,

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<sup>55</sup> What Wendell Berry criticized in literary education in general is particularly pointed when it comes to Scripture: “teachers and students read the great songs and stories to learn about them, not to learn from them” (quoted in Dawn, *Reaching Out*, 201). While the history of Scripture is our only infallible sourcebook and guide, we can grow in our maturity by considering all of church history and how Christians from the past have understood and applied the Bible. As Cicero said, “To remain ignorant of things that happened before you were born is to remain a child” (quoted in Horton, *A Better Way*, 170).

<sup>56</sup> Prayer meetings offer a great opportunity for God’s family to gather together for corporate prayer. Unfortunately, often these meetings are merely a running bulletin board for various health concerns and other types of (legitimate) “give us this day our daily bread” concerns with little thought of God’s name being hallowed or his kingdom advancing in the world. Taking the words of Scripture into our prayers offers many advantages, including confidence of God’s will, easing our fears of knowing what to say, and stimulating us to variety and clarity. The Puritans stand as an example of those who “discovered the great open secret of prayer: the value of praying God’s words back to him” (*Piercing Heaven: Prayers of the Puritans*, edited by Robert Elmer [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019], 4.). For an excellent resource on letting Scripture itself shape our prayers, see D.A. Carson, *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014).

<sup>57</sup> While the Puritans had a reputation for lengthier prayers, Anglican church liturgy contains a number of “collects” (short prayers of petition) that are quite brief and simple while remaining richly biblical. See *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer*, edited by Frederick Barbee and Paul Zahl (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>58</sup> Confession of sin is one type of prayer that is rarer to find outside of churches who self-consciously view themselves in the stream of the Reformed tradition. Perhaps it sounds too Roman Catholic, or perhaps its neglect goes along with the general deemphasis of sin in many churches. But the old covenant assemblies often had corporate confession of sin (e.g. Ezra 9-10). Yes, new covenant realities bring even greater freedom and joy to our worship, but I’ve suggested that the Lord’s Prayer (including “forgive us our trespasses”) remains a tremendous resource and pattern for corporate worship. How much more joy and gladness erupts when we first take time to remind ourselves of the depth of our sin! James 5:16 (“Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another”) may be directed more toward individual relationships, but corporate worship practices can help set in motion and multiply all kinds of edifying activity.

<sup>59</sup> Gibson, *Reformation Worship*, 670-684.

but the titling, while a form not mandated from Scripture, does help to give focus to the breadth and depth of prayer.

### *Singing*

God's people sing because he sings in their midst. Zephaniah 3:17: "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."<sup>60</sup> As the truths of Christ's gospel are celebrated (1 Tim 3:15-17) and the love of God is poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5) and we are filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18), singing is the natural overflow. The OT people of God had a whole collection of songs, the book of Psalms. Spanning many centuries, multiple inspired composers, and various situations, Psalms abounds with invitations to sing. "Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!" (Psalm 96:1-3). And once again the great cause and focus of singing is the grandeur of God: "... For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised" (v.4). When Psalm 96 goes on to ascribe glory to Jahweh and call us to worship him in the splendor of holiness (vv.7-9), we can't help but understand singing as a core part of such worship.<sup>61</sup>

When Jesus gathers with his disciples for the last supper, after the bread and wine they sing a hymn (Mark 14:26).<sup>62</sup> Even when Paul and Silas are stuck in prison, unable to evangelize

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<sup>60</sup> Kauflin observes that singing bears a Trinitarian stamp. Not only does the Father sing over his people, Christ sang with his disciples (Matt 26:30), and it is the Spirit who fills us to sing (Eph 5:18-19) [*Worship Matters*, 99].

<sup>61</sup> Vanhoozer writes, "Can we truly know God *without* singing his praise? Is not theology without doxology a contradiction in terms?" (*Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 148).

<sup>62</sup> Many scholars believe that in keeping with the Jewish custom associated with the Passover meal, they would have sung Psalm 118, the climax of the six Psalms associated progressively with the Passover, Psalm 113-118 (See Old, *Worship*, 113).

at large and contribute directly to the formation of worshipping assemblies, they still can't help but sing (Acts 16:25). There are multiple commands for churches to sing (Eph 5:18-20; Col 3:14-17). When we examine these commands, a couple points stand out. First, there is a Word/doctrinal component. We are to sing as we let the word of Christ dwell in us richly (Col 3:16). Our songs should be packed with Scripture and the truths of Scripture. Colossians also says that singing is a form of "teaching and admonishing one another" (v.16)—so we should always be prepared to ask what we are learning in and through our songs, and how the great doctrines of the faith are being trumpeted as we sing. Second, we observe in both Eph 5 and Col 3 that singing is congregational. Paul writes both letters to all the "saints" in their respective places, and these letters were read aloud in NT assemblies. As a result, when they are told to address "one another" in singing (Eph 5:19) or to teach and admonish "one another" by singing, the natural assumption would be that the people all participate together in singing.<sup>63</sup> To outside observers, singing should be one of the most obvious corporate elements of corporate worship.

Just as we are called to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30), singing helps us to engage in worship with the entirety of our being. Songs often move us in a way that mere words do not, and this is a gift from God, who made us to be complex emotional, physical, spiritual, poetic beings. Songs help us remember the truths of God, as evidenced by children who from an early age quickly pick up and repeat songs. In addition, singing is a form of teaching that should be passed along generationally.<sup>64</sup> Given the teaching component of songs, and given the preliminary command not to be filled with wine but to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18), we want the glory of God, the truth of his Word, the mercy of Christ, and the joy of the Holy Spirit to be the primary catalysts in this element of worship. A

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<sup>63</sup> We aren't given any lengthy descriptions of exactly what such singing looked like in the early church. Perhaps it was occasionally antiphonal, but we don't read of gifted singers showcasing their individual vocal abilities in a spotlighted "special number."

<sup>64</sup> Marva Dawn surveyed a class of seventh and eighth graders in her church and reports: "Their responses matched exactly—every kid who loved the liturgy was a child of parents who sang it" (*Reaching Out*, 149).

rowdy, out of control, chaotic atmosphere doesn't match the Spirit's working, and we should prayerfully depend on the Spirit rather than using music as a manipulative tool with little regard for the content of the songs. With that said, in some church traditions one gets the impression that singing is akin to a painful procedure, and that this very mumbling painfulness is what makes it somehow more "spiritual" or "reverent." In such assemblies, "the joy of the Lord is our strength" (Neh 8:10) becomes "the boredom of the Lord is our lot."<sup>65</sup> We should expect emotional responses in worship rather than being on high alert to avoid them.<sup>66</sup>

The Psalms are very helpful here (surprise surprise!). God's inspired songbook is a resource and guide for our singing. When we plunge into the Psalms we find a wide array of wholehearted and poetic responses to God, from joy and thanks to sorrow and lament.<sup>67</sup> Given the diversity of the Psalms, and given the variety even within heaven itself (myriads of worshipers calling out "with a loud voice" [Rev 5:12] coupled with silence for a half hour [Rev 8:1]), we shouldn't be surprised with a range of heartfelt expressions. In fact, we should perhaps be wary when a church's songs seem wholly tilted toward one side of the emotional spectrum.<sup>68</sup> Since we live in the already-not yet of new covenant worship, we have both joys and sorrows. The hills and valleys of the Christian life can be reflected through an array of songs. The constant triumphalism of Christian radio doesn't provide a liturgy for the suffering and the

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<sup>65</sup> Bob Kauflin writes, "How could anyone ever think worshipping God is boring? There's not limit to his holiness, glory, and sovereignty, no end to his riches, wisdom, and righteousness. All his attributes exist together in perfect harmony, perfect balance, perfect cooperation, with no contradiction, no confusion, and no diminishing of their glory forever" (*Worship Matters*, 64).

<sup>66</sup> Jonathan Edwards is not usually thought of as a charismatic emotionalist (although he was by some of his contemporaries). He writes, "And the duty of singing praises to God, seems to be wholly appointed to excite and express religious affections" (*Religious Affections*, in the Works of Jonathan Edwards [New Haven: Yale, 1959], vol 2, p.115).

<sup>67</sup> In his preface to his commentary on Psalms, Calvin writes that the Psalms are: "An anatomy of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror."

<sup>68</sup> We could broaden this point to observe that there are a variety of biblical polls in corporate worship, and some churches tend towards certain polls and away from others. Kauflin helpfully walks through examples such as transcendence-immanence, heard-heart, internal-external, vertical-horizontal, planned-spontaneous, rooted-relevant, and more (*Worship Matters*, 159-193).

weariness,<sup>69</sup> just as a continual doldrum of dreary songs fails to capture the reality that Christ is risen indeed!

Of course there are cultural elements at play. One church's hymn of celebration is another church's funeral dirge, and even within one church there can be quite a number of socioeconomic, ethnic, and background factors which contribute to how individuals view songs differently. But the posture of worship seeks the glory of God and the good my neighbor. If singing is indeed *corporate* worship, then when we come to church we don't demand our individual favorite song or offer a condescending sigh when others around us sing heartily to a song we happen to know is in reality a clunker. Rather we look on the interests of others (Php 2:4), striving in faith to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those weep (Rom 12:15), for we are members of one body (Rom 12:5).

Notice to this point I have stressed songs and singing, and the whole-souled chorus of the redeemed in its variegated shapes, but I haven't said anything explicitly about musical style.<sup>70</sup> Naturally, musical style assists and supports various types of responses to God; however, when many people talk about the music in their church, they focus almost exclusively on the instruments, arrangements, and musical stylings rather than on the singing (unless there are one or two singers on stage they happen to really like). Some people make the "music ministry" (rated by style and skill) a primary or even the chief consideration when they choose a church.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> See the provocative essay by Carl Trueman, "What Do Miserable Christians Sing?" (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/what-do-miserable-christians-sing/>)

<sup>70</sup> Mike Cospers recommends viewing musical style under the rubric of hospitality (*Rhythms of Grace* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013], 181).

<sup>71</sup> This emphasis has led to "worship wars" in previous decades where churches split between advocates for "traditional" worship and advocates of "contemporary" worship, even though those labels are a bit simplistic since there can be a number of varying styles associated with each. Cospers provocatively warns, "Today, when many worship services are reduced to preaching and music, it becomes very easy to equate music with worship—and that's a dangerous slope to park your car on. If music *is* worship, then when you mess with someone's musical preferences, you threaten their access to God. No wonder debates become so heated" (*Rhythms of Grace*, 153). Marva Dawn likewise argues that "traditional" and "contemporary" styles of worship "both can easily become idolatrous" (*Reaching Out*, 93).

Yet the NT is virtually silent when it comes to musical instruments and style of worship, so such committed passion to a certain style of instrumentation, though well-intentioned, can easily drift away from a passion to the actual elements of worship (important!), to the various forms of worship (not as important).<sup>72</sup> Here is one easy diagnostic test: Would you and those in your church be quicker to voice concern if Scripture reading was left out for a month of services, or would you be quicker to voice concern if the organ or the drums were left out for a month?

And this leads to a conspicuous weakness in the attitude of many Christians—they associate corporate “worship” almost exclusively with the musical portion of the service. They say “worship was great today,” meaning they liked the music/songs. If they liked the sermon

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<sup>72</sup> Some people by conviction do consider accompaniment to be an element of worship rather than a mere form. On the one hand, some churches practice only a cappella singing based on the absence of instruments in the NT. Calvin himself (and many in the early Reformed tradition) illustrate this view. His commentary on Psalm 81:3 offers a representative sample: “With respect to the tablet, harp, and psaltery, we have formerly observed, and will find it necessary afterwards to repeat the same remark, that the Levites, under the law, were justified in making use of instrumental music in the worship of God; it having been his will to train his people, while they were as yet tender and like children, by such rudiments, until the coming of Christ. But now when the clear light of the gospel has dissipated the shadows of the law, and taught us that God is to be served in a simpler form, it would be to act a foolish and mistaken part to imitate that which the prophet enjoined only upon those of his own time.” On the other hand, and this would be far more common today, many cite the examples of instruments in the Psalms and old covenant worship and conclude that God’s Word regulates that we should use a host of instruments in worship (although people in this category have a peculiar knack for transforming the actual instruments listed in the OT into their preferred set of instruments for today, whether a symphony orchestra or a rock band). I take a moderating view that sees instruments as an optional but unnecessary form. Just as microphones and amplification may aid the hearing of the proclaimed Word, instruments may aid in congregational singing, but that is the ultimate test—when they distract and discourage congregational singing like a crackling microphone distracts from the sermon, it’s time for an adjustment. Although Calvin is articulate and reasonable in his call to abolish instruments, he fails to show how instruments specifically are fulfilled in and through Christ. Hebrews tells us that Christ fulfills the priesthood, and the temple, and the sacrifices, but it leaves off mention of instruments. Certainly other parts of old covenant worship and priestly activity are retained (e.g. reading Scripture), so it seems a bit heavy handed to take anything associated with the priests or temple and assume it is abolished. In addition, when John sees the worship of the eschaton, he sees worshipers standing with harps in their hands (Rev 5:8; 15:2). Perhaps this language is figurative, but Revelation makes a point to say that there is no more need for the temple (Rev 21:22), while it holds up the sound of harps as a melodious anticipation for God’s people (Rev 14:2). If instruments are sanctified enough for the new Eden they’re probably sanctified enough for the new covenant. But Calvin does helpfully draw out the principle that there may be creation goods that we can celebrate and cultivate in all-of-life worship in ways that are less than helpful for corporate worship, and Calvin well observes that new covenant worship trends toward simplified, replicable worship—e.g. the bread and wine. With music, no church can be completely style neutral, and there is an aspect of subjectivity, but some texts and tunes rise to the top, remaining beautiful while at the same time more easily engaging the whole congregation. If I’m going to quote Calvin I guess I should at least let Luther have some say—Luther said that anyone who didn’t appreciate the beauty of the multipart chorales of his day “must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs” (quoted in Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 98).

they would instead say, “Great sermon pastor!” If they were moved by a prayer they would say, “John’s prayer really touched me.” “Vibrant worship” rarely means, “The grace of the Spirit was so pronounced during our prayers of thanksgiving!” Instead, it more often means something like, “The band was on fire today.” Churches facilitate this attitude by referring to the music guy as the “worship leader.”<sup>73</sup> The answer is not to deemphasize singing so that we can exclusively promote preaching or some other element instead. God made us to sing, and he tells us to sing together. People should be passionate about singing,<sup>74</sup> and healthy churches are marked in part by strong congregational singing. But rather than making this element the be all and end all of corporate “worship,” we should likewise cherish every element of corporate worship.

### *Giving*

No one would debate that the Bible instructs us to give. But when should we give, and how should we give? Doesn’t Jesus say that when we give we shouldn’t let our left hand know what our right hand is doing (Matt 6:3)? Isn’t giving a purely personal decision that we do on our own to whom we want when and how the Spirit prompts us? Yes and no. Yes, “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). We don’t see the same specific instructions for a “tithe” in the new covenant in the way that we do in the old covenant.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, we should hesitate before regulating a specific portion of income—God prospers different people in different measures, and some even seem extra-gifted in the grace of giving (Rom 12:6-8).

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<sup>73</sup> Musicians who can skillfully support and nurture congregational singing are indeed valuable. On a practical level, it helps everyone sing when the musicians know what they are doing and do it with excellence (1 Chron 15:22). My point is simply that a good vocalist or guitar player is not the one promoting worship as though the person who comes up to pray is doing something else.

<sup>74</sup> John Wesley instructs, “Beware of singing as if you were half-dead or half-asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan” (“Directions for Singing,” *Select Hymns* [1761]).

<sup>75</sup> Although if you did add up all the various required gifts and offerings in the old covenant it would actually be more than 10%. A tithe (tenth) is something of a starting point.

However, having acknowledged there is no precise law, normally things are magnified in the new covenant. The work of the Spirit is greater. Christ has come and lavishly given himself for us, renewing the command to love one another but magnifying it by his own almighty example. And it is the lavish nature of Christ's self-giving which should engender our generosity: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Mary anoints Jesus with expensive oil (John 12:3-5), people in the early church are freely selling possessions so they might contribute to others (Acts 2:45), and the Macedonian churches are commended for generous giving even out of their own relative poverty (2 Cor 8:1-5). Taking these examples and reports into account, if anything we would conclude that though times and circumstances may vary, people normally give more with the coming of Christ than in the old covenant, not less.<sup>76</sup>

To this point, I haven't addressed whether or not giving should be a regular element of corporate worship. But notice that Paul commends the Macedonian *churches* for their giving (2 Cor 8:1). Paul likely had any number of private patrons. And we have great freedom and encouragement to give to anyone anytime (Luke 10:25-37). Yet, like prayer, giving is something that can and should be done spontaneously throughout everyday life, and at the same time retaining a corporate shape—collections appear to be a regular part of early assemblies. For instance, when Paul writes to the Corinthians, he says, "Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper" (1 Cor 16:1-2). "As he may prospers" signifies that not all will give the same amount. However, the instructions about

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<sup>76</sup> Wanting to do what God requires is a laudable attitude. However, sometimes a kind of giving legalism creeps in (not in the sense of being saved by works) where we only want to do what is absolutely required, and nothing more. So yes, the Pharisees did add to the law in ways God didn't intend, but in one sense they sought to reduce the law to a keepable standard, missing the goal of heart change. One wonders if sometimes those who eagerly promote a 10% mandate want to feel good about themselves for obeying the tithe principle so they can brush aside the more lavish examples of generosity throughout the NT.



collections that Paul gives to the church of Corinth are the same instructions he gave to the “churches of Galatia”—we seem to have something of an early church custom and practice. In addition, Paul mentions the “first day of every week,” the Lord’s Day of resurrection, when Christians especially assemble to break bread and hear teaching from Scripture (Acts 20:7). On the basis of this pattern churches do well to include giving as a regular element of their corporate worship.<sup>77</sup> There is something peculiarly special and moving when God’s people together give of their resources to their Savior.<sup>78</sup>

So yes, giving is spiritually guided and individually nurtured in all-of-life, but no, giving is not restricted to the private and personal sphere as though it had no place in church worship. The abuse of a good practice is no reason to discontinue it, and we shouldn’t let TV hucksters frighten us from following the pattern of Scripture in appropriate ways. Just as with prayer, when Jesus commends secret giving in Matthew 6, he is addressing hypocrites, in this case hypocrites who show off how much they give. Since we are a body, the point of giving is never to show off our own gifts but to contribute to the good of the whole. We don’t pressure people to do what they don’t want to do; rather, we encourage our fellow-believers to excel in everything, including the “grace” of giving—what a privilege (2 Cor 8:1-7)!<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, the Greek word for communion, *κοινωνία*, has the broader meaning of “sharing,” and in some contexts it refers to financial support (Romans 15:26). Bucer utilized this idea to draw together the Lord’s Supper and the giving of alms (Old, *Worship*, 153).

<sup>78</sup> The form of giving may vary from culture to culture—chicken eggs or checks. But when churches utilize a box in the lobby or direct deposit, it can be easier to view giving through a strictly individual lens. I am giving *to* the body, yes, but the act of giving is not as clearly a collective act *of* the worshipping body. It may be helpful to retain collection plates or at least a time for the offering in the order of worship so that the congregation can give thoughtful and collective attention to their giving, whatever form they happen to use.

<sup>79</sup> The luxurious lives of some false teachers lends credence to the notion that they are “lovers of money” (1 Tim 6:10; 1 Peter 5:2), making it all the more wise for churches to know what they are taking collections for and how the gifts are being used. In Scripture, we normally see church money going to others in need (Acts 2:45; 2 Cor 8:4), with a priority to fellow believers (Gal 6:10). In addition, money is given to missionaries like Paul (Php 4:15) and many who labor in pastoral ministry (1 Tim 5:17-18) so that they can devote themselves more fully to the proclamation of the gospel and the edification of churches. I don’t know whether or not Paul had to pay a rental fee for the Hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10), but we don’t find collections taken for cathedral-like “new temples” or community beautification projects. For those churches that have facilities, it’s good to steward this circumstance of our corporate worship with a view toward the ultimate goal of making disciples (Matt 28:19), and churches

As with every aspect of worship, our giving is first an act of worship toward God. He is the creator of all and owns all, and we together acknowledge him in gratitude and hope. And as with other elements of worship, we come to give glory to God but we find that he does bless us. We give, but we end up receiving far more, for as our Lord says, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

### *Lord’s Supper*

Food is intertwined with communal worship and with covenants throughout the pages of Scripture. The very sin of Adam and Eve was eating from the wrong tree instead of enjoying fellowship with God through all the other trees he had given them (Gen 2:16). When God redeemed his people from Egypt, he gave them a Passover meal (Exod 12:43-51). When Moses and 70 elders go up to the mountain to encounter God, “they beheld God, and ate and drank” (Exod 24:11). When the people assemble to give toward the construction of the temple, “They ate and drank before the Lord on that day with great gladness” (1 Chron 29:22). On the cusp of his crucifixion, when Christ is about to pour out his body as offering to God on behalf of sinners, he institutes the Lord’s Supper, transitioning from the old covenant to the new covenant yet once more through the fulfillment that he himself provides.

It is this last supper that becomes the Lord’s supper, celebrated in Christian assemblies from the earliest days in the wake of the resurrection. Acts 20:7 records, “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread....” The Lord’s Day (Rev 1:10) is the occasion of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:20). Jesus also “broke the bread” in the context of a general meal rather than the Lord’s Supper specifically (Matt 24:19), so it’s not always easy to tell where general fellowship meals stop, and the Lord’s Supper starts (Acts 2:46-47). But this ambiguity highlights an important point: the Lord’s Supper is intended to symbolize and enact a

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(especially in the West) do well to regularly ask how our budgets align with the priorities of Scripture. Piper writes, “The church is not expecting the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10) to come admire Christian palaces. Instead the church expects to pour its resources into going to the perishing people who are ruled by all the queens and kings of this world” (*Expository Exultation*, 282-283).

fellowship meal.<sup>80</sup> It's not a superstitious, hocus pocus ritual but a sharing together with God and his people. Indeed, just as with other elements of corporate worship, we would find it only good and right if the Lord's Supper spilled over from the assembly into all kinds of body life fellowship and sharing throughout the week.

As simple as the Lord's Supper may be, there are a whole host of applications we can draw from it, and I can only highlight some of them here. First, as Christ himself said, it is a time for us to remember together what he accomplished (Luke 22:19). The elements are a picture form of the gospel, his broken body and shed blood, given for us as a death substitute to pay the price to set us free. As we reflect on the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice, we are reminded of our sinfulness and the great cost—surely there is no other way of salvation than through the vicarious suffering of our Lord, bearing the awesome weight of sin and the wrath of God. Alongside the idea of remembering is that of proclaiming—through the Lord's Supper we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor 11:26). We are not merely cognitively affirming Christ's work in our own minds; we are dramatically, visibly, symbolically announcing his work to one another and to all who may watch us. Hallelujah that the work is finished once for all, and we trust in him and find life in him!

In addition to remembering the gospel, in the Lord's Supper we commune with our Savior. In many traditions, “communion” is another way of speaking about the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. This plays on the language of 1 Corinthians 10:16, where Paul refers to the cup and the bread as a *κοινωνία* (sharing or participation or communion) in Christ. This aspect sets the Lord's Supper in definite contrast to secular holidays where we may reflect fondly on heroes from the past without presuming that we are actually communing with them in the present. But

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<sup>80</sup> Given that Paul says, “Don't you have houses to eat and drink in?” (1 Cor 11:22), I'm not sure that the regular Lord's Supper was meant to be a massive Thanksgiving feast parallel to OT feast days. Bread and wine are the only stated elements—once again simplicity and replicability rise to the fore. The main feasting that we are doing is to feast on Christ by faith and to feast on the union that we have in him with one another. On the other hand, a tiny stale wafer and a thimble full of juice makes it harder to appreciate the fellowship meal aspect of the ordinance. Perhaps the “love feasts” described by Jude (v.12) and early writers like Tertullian capture a practice where the elements of the Lord's Supper were at times conjoined with a more general meal.

Christ is a risen and living Savior who walks among us, and the Spirit actively joins us with the worship of the heavenly assembly as we come to Jesus himself (Heb 12:18-25). The Lord's supper is a sacred and splendid meal. Paul compares and contrasts "participating" in the body and blood of Christ with the idolatrous sexual revelry of Israel and the demonic worship of pagan sacrificial meals (1 Cor 10:6-22). Our Savior is a jealous husband who wants us for himself, and those who participate thoughtlessly find a stark warning of judgment (1 Cor 11:29-32). We shouldn't literalize the body and blood of Christ in the elements;<sup>81</sup> nor do we have to turn the elements into a quaint memorial and nothing more.<sup>82</sup>

Third, to repeat, the Lord's Supper calls us to communion with one another. The language of meals and sharing implies this already. But our fellowship with one another is not separated from our communion with Christ, as though half of the time we engage our Lord and then we break into thanking God for our Christian friends as well and giving them a pat on the back. Christ's human body was sacrificed for us, and Scripture refers to the church as his body (Eph 1:23). This overlap isn't coincidence. As we trust in Christ's atoning work and as we are united to him by faith, we are also necessarily united with everyone else who so trusts in him.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, the Lord's Supper is not primarily a time for us to individually reflect on ourselves and our own individual salvation but to remember together that we all have been saved by the

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<sup>81</sup> Old aptly states that Christ is not present "on" the table but he is present "at" the table (*Worship*, 132).

<sup>82</sup> Among Protestants, the Lord's Supper caused more strain than any other element of corporate worship. Arguably, different viewpoints on the Lord's Supper were the starting point and the most significant catalyst for the various Protestant denominations we see today. Luther and his followers did not agree with Roman Catholics that the bread and wine were transformed into the body and blood of Christ and the Christ was re-sacrificed in every communion. However, they did hold that Christ's physical body was somehow "in, with, and under" the elements. Zwingli and those surrounding him are associated with a "memorial" view that tends to minimize the mysticism associated with Christ's presence in the supper. That leaves the Reformed strand that in variegated ways tends to fall under the label of "spiritual presence."

<sup>83</sup> In 1 Corinthians 11:29 when Paul calls Christians to "discern the body," commentators debate whether he is calling Christians to have a proper theology of the cross or whether he is calling them to grasp the shared life and concern they should have for the church. But we don't need to drive a wedge between truths that God has joined together. We begin with the foundation of Christ's work for us, but true faith in that work affects our view of his body on earth, as the context of 1 Cor 11 emphasizes.

blood of Christ and that we all together are communing with him by faith in the present.<sup>84</sup> In a world that preaches the need to find our identity in work or ethnicity or sexuality or political affiliation, the Lord's Supper repeatedly proclaims that our greater collective identity is the body of Christ. Listen to the words of 1 Corinthians 10:16-17: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." We all eat the same bread and drink the same wine because we have union through Christ with one another.<sup>85</sup>

In addition, the Lord's Supper beckons us toward the future, making explicit the already-not yet dynamic that is implicit throughout corporate worship.<sup>86</sup> Even though we do feed on Christ by faith and commune with the king in his spiritual kingdom, there is another sense in which we await the day when he will ultimately fulfill his promise to drink it new with us in his Father's kingdom (Matt 26:29). Through the Lord's Supper we proclaim his death "until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26), and we eat and drink in expectant hope as we eagerly await his return. In

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<sup>84</sup> Vanhoozer writes, "The meaning of the gospel and the Christian life comes to focus in worship as nowhere else" (*Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 121). If this is true, then few other places in corporate worship bring the gospel and the Christian life together quite like the Lord's Supper. And this practice has a formative influence. Dawn observes, "Who you are as an individual believer depends greatly upon the character of the community of believers in which you are nurtured. How faithfully does that community incarnate God's presence and pass on the narratives that reveal God when they assemble together?" (*Reaching Out*, 105).

<sup>85</sup> The other side of communion with God's people is the need for church discipline. While not always categorized as a separate element of corporate worship, discipline has often been understood as a necessary practice of a true church. Yet at the final corrective stage it does take place when Christians assemble in the name of Christ (Matt 18:16-20; 1 Cor 5:4), and church discipline is a collective act of the gathered body that is at heart an act of worship. We judge and pronounce another professing believer to be removed from his public standing among the people of God, showing that we value the glory of God and the truth of God's speech more than the claims of anyone we have been committed to, and more than the claims of what should be fashionable and acceptable in belief and life from a culture that stands against Christ. In the final corrective stage church discipline has been called "excommunication," signifying its connection to the ordinance of communion. Through communion together we affirm the professions of those who partake, and when we "ex" communicate someone we ask them to refrain from the Lord's Table since we can no longer affirm their profession of faith.

<sup>86</sup> For example, John Calvin's prayers often praise God and petition him in the present while looking forward to the future kingdom. See *Lifting Up Our Hearts: 150 Selected Prayers from John Calvin*, edited by Dustin Bengé (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2012).

this way the Lord's Supper also nurtures our faith, for we can solidly set our hope fully on the grace that will be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1:13). The Last Supper might have been the last supper before the death of Christ, but there is another last supper yet future, a last supper attendant with the last day and the last trumpet—the marriage supper of the lamb (Rev 19:6-9). In this age our feasting mingles with fasting because the groom isn't here (Matt 9:15). Yet we eat with confidence and joy since his promises are sealed, certain, and secure.

One might agree that all these elements should be included in corporate worship and still wonder about the priority among them. Historically, the tension is most acute between the Lord's Supper and preaching.<sup>87</sup> In response, the gospel has a definite content—Christ died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3). The visible signs of baptism and the Lord's Supper do indeed portray the gospel, but they need an explanatory word.<sup>88</sup> Jesus proclaimed to his followers the actual meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper—the Word attended the sign. A silent ritual act in and of itself will not nurture faith, because faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ (Rom 10:17).<sup>89</sup> So we could say that reading and preaching are more basic than the ordinances, but I

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<sup>87</sup> Even the architectural layout in church buildings has often reflected this tension. In Roman Catholic church buildings the altar (for the Lord's Supper is viewed as a living sacrifice) tended to be front and central, while Protestant church buildings put the pulpit above a common table.

<sup>88</sup> An emphasis on other types of visual aids and dramas in corporate worship clouds the vibrant visual dramas the Lord has given us in the ordinances. In addition, as Ken Myers observes, "The loss of a love of language... is not a neutral cultural change... [but] is a dehumanizing cultural decline.... For the church to add its blessing to the dominance of visual communication at the expense of the verbal is to add momentum to the world's confusion about the shape of what constitutes well lived human life" ("Recovering the Word in an Image-Based Culture," [<https://equip.sbts.edu/category/event/lectures/icw/page/3/>]).

<sup>89</sup> In some Protestant circles there is a renewed interest in recovering the importance of the ordinances (often called sacraments, which is not in and of itself a bad term). I'm not opposed to retrieving sacramental theology where and when it is biblical and where and when it may be undervalued. However, too often in such circles preaching is (intentionally?) minimized. The argument sounds something like this: "We have emphasized cognitive processing too much in our worship. God made us to be embodied people and we need the forms and rhythms of the ancient church, not just more information for our brains. More doing and less thinking. In addition, we are a generation that is much more visually oriented than preceding generations, and people will respond to embodied community rituals more than they will respond to a lecture." Such reasoning attempts to sound generous and universal (catholic with a small c), but it betrays provincialism—there are many cultural contexts in which the act of preaching and the reception of the hearers is quite apparently embodied! While our bodies are created and

hesitate to underweight the ordinances. Baptism is a once for all event that marks the outset of the public Christian life.<sup>90</sup> While the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God and God himself actively speaks through his Word, and while every aspect of worship can be a means of grace that builds us up, including the Word (Acts 20:32), the strong language of “participation” in Christ attaches itself conspicuously to the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 10:16).<sup>91</sup> The Lord’s Supper is the culmination of corporate worship when we anticipate the day when the hearing of faith gives way to sight and eternal love. Many liturgies throughout the centuries reiterate this idea of the Lord’s Supper as the culmination of corporate worship by placing the Lord’s Supper toward the end.

For some people the term “liturgy” conjures up images of vestments and dreary formalism. But the term itself simply refers to what we might call the “order of service.” In this sense, all churches have some form of liturgy, or regular pattern of worship. In some churches it is more spontaneous and unplanned, while in other churches it is more formal and scripted.<sup>92</sup> Is there a proper order to our worship service? Once again while the Bible gives us the elements of worship, it doesn’t give us a blueprint order of worship for each Lord’s Day assembly. Nevertheless, churches doing “all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31) should be intentional about trying to bring every aspect of the order of worship in service to the worship of the triune God.

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good, and while the ordinances do involve our whole selves in a different but complementary way from preaching, and while it’s true that some churches can become heady and dry in a lopsided way, once again the visual drama of the sacraments needs an explanatory Word.

<sup>90</sup> One pastor tells the story of coming to a new church and discontinuing their practice of an “altar call” at the close of the sermon. One woman asked in shock, “But how will new Christians publicly testify of their faith in Christ?!” He responded, “The same way they have been doing it for 2000 years—baptism!” We don’t need to introduce other elements of worship, but neither should we minimize given elements.

<sup>91</sup> Michael Haykin argues that Charles Wesley, the author of numerous robust evangelical hymns, viewed the Lord’s Supper as the chief means of grace that God has given to his people (“Come Thou Everlasting Spirit: Spirituality and the Lord’s Supper in Charles Wesley’s Hymns,” [<https://equip.sbts.edu/category/event/lectures/icw/page/2/>]).

<sup>92</sup> D.G. Hart compares liturgical structures to rules in a baseball game—we surrender some measure of individual freedom in order to play a common game together (cited in Horton, *A Better Way*, 146). Cospers uses a similar illustration with softball (*Rhythms of Grace*, 91-92).

Many church traditions have observed general patterns in biblical corporate worship, and they find it helpful to rehearse the gospel story even in the way that the service is structured.<sup>93</sup>

### **Purposes of Worship**

In many ways, the purposes of worship have been woven throughout this paper or follow as natural implications of what has been said. But some further summary and application may be helpful.<sup>94</sup> God in his grace and kindness has not merely given us a pattern of sound words and practices to follow in our corporate worship, he has given us insight into his marvelous wisdom in ordaining these things. The Lord never acts arbitrarily but always with great reason and purpose.

First and most importantly, God has ordained and prioritized corporate worship so that he might be glorified. As with the rest of human life and the created order, all is by his will and for his glory (Rev 4:11). We together are a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), and God is re-creating us so that we with one voice may glorify him (Rom 15:6). Paul preached in order to magnify the unsearchable riches of Christ and unpack the eternal plan of God so that God’s glory would be known and loved through the church (Eph 3:1-21). No wonder that when the Psalms call on God’s people to come and worship him, they so often unite that call to worship with the language of ascribing glory to God (Psalm 29:1-9; 96:1-9). This ascription celebrates the character and works of God (Psalm 57:1-11; 105:1-45). The Westminster Shorter Catechism tells

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<sup>93</sup> Bryan Chapell brings a number of historic liturgies under the following pattern: adoration-confession-assurance-thanksgiving-petition-instruction-charge-benediction (*Christ-Centered Worship*, 100). He also observes similar patterns in passages like Isaiah 6, Deuteronomy 5, 2 Chronicles 5-7, Romans 11-15, and Revelation 4-21 (103-111). Mike Cospers admits that when he decided to plan the order of service in a way that traces the arc of the gospel story, “I thought I was brilliant and innovative. In truth, I was only rediscovering what many generations of Christians had discovered long, long before” (*Rhythms of Grace*, 18).

<sup>94</sup> Matt Merker writes about the why of worship—that we gather “unto God’s glory, for our mutual good, before the world’s gaze” (*Corporate Worship*, 27).



us from the outset that the chief end of man is “to worship God and enjoy him forever.” This is the chief aim of corporate worship as well, and in the new Eden we find the family of God and the redeemed society subsumed into an eternal assembly of praise where the lamb is all the glory of Immanuel’s land. The language of enjoying God and celebrating his glory remind us that we have a personal stake in corporate worship. God is more glorified with heartfelt (orthodox) praise than with rote orthodoxy. Jubilation is not the only correct key of worship—once again the Psalms themselves contain an array of worshipful responses. But when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the glory of God, we cannot help but be deeply affected.<sup>95</sup>

And this reality leads to a second great purpose of corporate worship—the building up of believers. Although our hearts remain in part deceitful and we can be tempted to put ourselves on the throne or assume that we know what is best apart from God’s Word, those that come to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him (Heb 11:6). When we seek to lose ourselves in the glory of God we find our highest delight and fulfillment. And when we surround ourselves with the company of saints who share this mutual longing, we find God’s glory magnified and our collective pleasure multiplied.<sup>96</sup> We by faith direct our gaze to the glorious one and we ourselves are transformed into his glorious likeness (2 Cor 3:18). We must keep these purposes connected lest we bifurcate corporate worship into two utterly separate parts

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<sup>95</sup> In commenting on the Psalms and affirming the first question of the shorter catechism, C.S. Lewis observes the impulse towards communal worship, “I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: ‘Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?’ The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about.” The fuller passage is worth reading (*Reflections on the Psalms* [New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1958], 90-98).

<sup>96</sup> Chapell comments that if we turn the sanctuary into a mere lecture hall where right worship is simply about right thought, “Congregational participation, mutual encouragement, heart engagement, expressions of grief for sin, and joyous thanksgiving may increasingly seem superfluous, or even demeaning. Celebration is dismissed as ‘charismatic,’ awe is lost, and sacrament is reduced to remembrance instead of encounter with the presence of the risen Lord.... When this happens then those whose hearts yearn to respond to God in all the ways his Word describes (and all the ways he has made us to worship) will seek him elsewhere—including those places where truth has been sacrificed to experience” (*Christ-Centered Worship*, 67). Later he writes, “Some claim that worship should be entirely doxological, only concerned for the glory of God. But if God’s people have no delight in his glory and their worship stimulates none, then we reasonably question whether his glory has been rightly presented or perceived (138).

or lest we assume that “building up the body” is ultimately about growing in technical spiritual skills rather than growing into the head (Eph 4:13-15) and reflecting the image of the one who created and redeemed us (Eph 4:24). With those truths firmly under our belt, we can and should embrace the horizontal element of corporate worship. We are commanded to sing to one another (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16)! We don’t worship one another but we call on each other to glorify God and testify to one another of the truth and beauty of the triune God. And we can celebrate the evidence of God’s grace that we see in each other’s lives. The hydration of praise cultivates the fruit of the Spirit.<sup>97</sup>

Finally, corporate worship can be a means of evangelizing the lost. I hesitate to include this happy result of corporate worship as a purpose of worship, because some churches so focus on reaching the lost in their service that they fail to see the priority of glorifying God and building up believers. When Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he talks about how they should conduct themselves “if” they gather and an unbeliever enters (1 Cor 14:23). He doesn’t panic or lambaste them as though they missed the whole point when they gathered primarily to worship God and encourage one another in the faith rather than to reach out to seekers. All-of-life worship Monday to Saturday in workplaces and neighborhoods brings evangelism more to the fore. However, Paul does want the church to worship in a way that gives attention to the possibility of outsiders. And if God is present among his worshipping people, then we should want unbelievers to encounter that presence. Indeed, Paul writes of some who come into the assembly and are convicted and fall on their faces and worship God when they truly recognize

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<sup>97</sup> Some churches have a time during their worship service where they break to “greet one another.” Some view this tradition as too “man-centered” or “irreverent,” while others fear such greeting time is inauthentic and awkward when forced. While these criticisms might be valid in some cases, this practice gets at an important truth—we assemble for worship in part to stir one another up to love and good works (Heb 10:24-25). We can’t cram every single “one another” command into the order of worship, and it is a bit arbitrary to insert one of those admonitions (“greet one another” 2 Cor 13:12) while neglecting the others. But corporate worship should not be viewed as a time when we simply file into our individual pew seats and then file out with no thought of interaction with other believers. Perhaps we could consider the “one another” passages—often given first to churches and not just to individuals—as a necessary subset of the Lord’s Supper. As we commune together with one another through the bread and the wine, that communion overflows into Lord’s Day conversations of love and mutual admonishment.

his presence (1 Cor 14:24-25). Recognizing this, we should be wary of using vocabulary that is consistently unintelligible to those haven't grown up in church—we can explain terms and sprinkle apologetic answers to criticisms that come from the outside. At the same time, in the light of the NT, corporate worship serves the purpose of evangelism primarily when the church simply is the church. In other words, churches in their worship should continue to magnify the glory of God and seek the well-being of their fellow Christians rather than seeking to diagnose and prioritize the felt needs of those outside the family of God.<sup>98</sup> Unbelievers can be wooed by an other-worldly worship where the voice of God and the strange and shared love of diverse people forms a beautiful city on a hill that entices the lost to leave the strident and self-absorbed worship of this present age.<sup>99</sup> We are the bride of Christ, not the butler of culture.

1 Corinthians 12-14 brings together many of these themes. What we want for the lost is not simply that they would have a pleasant experience or come away with some ancient tips for a modern world, but instead that they would be struck with the glory of God and transformed into wholehearted worshipers. And this is the same thing we desire more and more for ourselves. A disciple is a constant learner and a better follower—and a deeper worshiper. We can never exhaust the glory of God, and we gather in fresh hope that the confessions of our mouths (1 Cor 12:3) finds a deeper echo in our hearts and in our assemblies. No wonder we exhort one another not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb 10:25)! The same Spirit who unites us to the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13-27) and distributes gifts for the glory of God and the good of his people is the same Spirit who calls us to the chief virtue of love (1 Cor 13). Love for our Lord and for his people compels us to worship him together, and as we worship through a dim glass in this age, we anticipate the day when we worship him together in the sinless, unveiled fullness of

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<sup>98</sup> Horton observes, “The golden calf may have been called the presence of God, but it was in truth nothing more than a projection of the worshipers’ felt needs” (*A Better Way*, 135).

<sup>99</sup> “It is clear that a religious fervor often characterized earliest Christian worship and would have been an impressive, attractive and meaningful feature” Larry Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 47. Edmund Clowney commends a corporate worship of “doxological evangelism” (quoted in Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 132).

eternal knowledge and glory. May our hearts echo the Psalmist: “Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength! Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts! Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!” (Psalm 96:7-9).