# FAITHFUL LIVES

Christian Reflections on the World – Faithful Worship

College of the Ozarks®

2020 | Volume 5

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The mission of College of the Ozarks is to provide the advantages of a Christian education for youth of both sexes, especially those found worthy, but who are without sufficient means to procure such training.

*Faithful Lives: Reflections on the World* is an annual journal produced by College of the Ozarks. The goal of the publication is to foster deep and substantive Christian thought in all areas of life by publishing articles that assume and explore the truthfulness of the Christian worldview perspective.





Cover image: *Christ Pantocrator* | mosaic | *(from the Deesis mosaic, Hagia Sophia)*
Istanbul, Turkey | ca 12th -13th Century
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*From the Editors:*

# In Defense of Corporate Worship

Christians have been gathering for two millennia in response to the work of God in redemption. While some practices and beliefs have changed through the centuries, the simple act of coming together as the church has withstood the test of time. Does anything with this type of legacy really need a *defense*? We believe the answer is a resounding "YES!" If the book of Judges teaches us anything, it is that faithfulness is not biologically inherited. The generational covenant renewals among the people of God in the Old Testament (Deut. 29 and Josh. 24) remind us that each generation must address its commitments and challenges afresh, and in light of God's Word. The church has always faced challenges, but two specific challenges are forcing twenty-first-century Christians to do some real soul searching when it comes to their commitment to corporate worship.

The first major challenge is a technical one: How do we even do corporate worship in a socially distanced, post-COVID world? At the College of the Ozarks, like most places, the act of gathering for corporate worship has changed. The changes are more than merely masking and distancing and measuring the distance between those who lead in congregational singing. These changes, though significant, are responses to mitigate the spread of the virus among the community. The more fundamental change is in the rapid adoption of digital forms of gathering that mirrors the adoption of these digital spaces in our personal lives. The digital space is no longer just the space of Gen Y or Z for their recreation and enjoyment. We see the power of technology in this digital space and realize that the digital life of our students forms and shapes their worldview. The move into this world allows us to gather and share a common experience of 'corporate' worship and hopefully stay connected to God, others, and ourselves. Technology allows us to stay connected, when circumstance requires us to be physically distanced.

The second challenge the church faces today is related to the first one: The same technology that has enabled us to "gather" has also allowed us to remain separate. Ironically, we are now engaged in "corporate" worship while sitting in a room by ourselves! Technology is not to blame in this scenario, and easy answers like demonizing Facebook Live are not the way forward. Many of us have been blessed by meeting with small groups, church friends, and even gathering for Sunday worship through various means of technology. The problem is that the technology has also altered our personal liturgies (or habits) for worship. Instead of waking up, getting ready, getting kids ready, driving to a location, seeing friends, and finding a seat; we hang out in our pajamas, grab some breakfast when church is about to start, and find a comfy spot on the couch. No one that we know really thinks remote worship is great, but it sure is convenient. With each passing week, these new Sunday morning patterns make it harder and harder for us to *want* to reengage the community like we did a year ago.

Given our COVID context, we should view remote worship like a cast placed upon a broken arm or leg. Broken bones need intentional, technologically-produced, protections that allow the bone to heal properly. Without these types of measures, there is the possibility of a broken bone coming back together but in a distorted or unhealthy way. The cast is necessary for a season, but no one can *live* in a cast and expect to have a healthy limb. In fact, anyone with personal experience knows that your arm or leg can be radically altered through the cast-induced healing process. What went into the cast as a firm, sun-tanned forearm, comes out weeks or months later as a pasty, atrophied reflection. The cast allows for healing, but we should not be shocked when we need some focused physical therapy to get things back to where they once were.

In this issue of *Faithful Lives* authors have been asked to wrestle with various aspects of Christian worship, from biblical theologies to practical issues facing every church today. While these articles do not present a single, unified argument for Christian worship, our hope is that these faithful reflections on worship in the Scriptures, in the church, and in the life of the believer will encourage us all to push forward through the present challenges. We need worship and we need one another. Finally, we must remember the sobering words of

our Lord when he was encouraged to silence his followers, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out" (Luke 19:40). Let us not surrender our praise to the rocks of the earth!

*Soli Deo Gloria*

William R. Osborne
Editor

Justin Carswell
VP Christian for Christian Ministries
Dean of the Chapel

FAITHFUL LIVES

# *Essays*

**Wassily Kandinsky**

*Composition V*

oil on canvas

1911

# Worship in the Garden of Eden

Eric Bolger*

## *Introduction*

Worship is a subject that can engender passion. Many are aware of the so-called "worship wars" of the past few decades in which congregations struggled to forge their way between the apparently opposing styles of "traditional" and "contemporary" worship music. Historically, aspects of the Protestant Reformation focused on worship, with Martin Luther rejecting some and accepting other aspects of the Roman Catholic worship of his time. Other reformers, such as John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli and their followers, differed from Luther on matters of worship, ranging from the type of music and instruments used in services to sometimes intense disagreements over the mode and timing of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Scripture, not surprisingly, has much to say about worship. One thinks of passages such as Isaiah 6, in which the prophet Isaiah has a vision of entering into heavenly worship amidst the singing of "holy, holy, holy" by the winged angels (seraphim), or of Jesus's words to the Samaritan woman at the well that the Father is seeking those who worship in "spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24 ). Jesus set the stage for the central symbolic acts of Christian worship with his baptism (Matt 3; Luke 3) and his institution of the Lord's Supper (e.g., Matt 26:26-29). And the Apostle Paul

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instructed, and even criticized, the church in Corinth about their abuse of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34) and the proper use of the gift of tongues in corporate worship (1 Cor 14).

## *Worship in the Bible*

When we examine the Bible's teaching on worship, we see that language for worship in Scripture centers on three primary ideas. The first is *honoring* God, the second is *serving* God, and the third is *respecting* or *revering* God.[1] Consideration of these three ideas takes us beyond a typical Sunday morning worship service, though they should all be a part of such a service. Clearly, one can honor, serve, and revere God outside of a formal worship service, that is, as part of one's daily life. In the Old Testament, Israel was invited to respond to God with honor, service, and reverence both formally (through its tabernacle and later temple-centered worship practices) and informally (through its way of life). The Old Testament prophets, in fact, often critique the people of Israel for going through the motions of formal worship without living out in their daily lives what that worship implied (e.g., Isa 1:11-17). In the New Testament, we have much less information about the specific ways the first Christians worshiped, though we know that their worship recognized that Jesus Christ was to be honored, served, and revered as God, and that he was understood to have fulfilled in himself Israel's worship in the temple.[2]

Since our focus in this essay is the story of the garden of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3, and since that story is connected especially to Israel's worship in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, it is important to discuss further what Israel's worship looked like. One aspect of the worship practice that God gave to Israel was that it was centered on a *place*. This place was first Mt. Horeb, also called Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments and other laws from the Lord, and then in the tabernacle, an elaborate and symbolic tent in which the Lord told Israel his presence would dwell. This tent was to move from place to place as Israel traveled through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, and God promised his presence would go with this "tent of meeting." Of course, eventually under King Solomon Israel constructed a permanent

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1 David Peterson, *Engaging with God*: *A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 55-79.

2 See Peterson, *Engaging*, 80-107.

structure, the temple in Jerusalem.

Another aspect of Israel's worship was that it included appointed *leaders* who represented God to the people and vice versa. These leaders were the priests, descended from Moses's brother Aaron and the most important of whom was the high priest, and the Levites, who helped the priests carry out their worship duties. In addition to appointed leaders, Israel's worship also included specified *objects* and *actions*. Among the objects were items found inside the tabernacle, such as the altar, lampstand, and ark of the covenant. Among the actions were various types of sacrifices, each of which had a specific purpose and method, and the various festivals that God gave to Israel as part of their regular worship. These festivals included the Day of Atonement and the Passover, to name just a few.

So, Israel's formal worship life was bound up with places, appointed leaders, objects, and actions, and its informal worship life was to reflect the same honor, service, and reverence that its formal worship implied. What does all of this have to do with the story of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3? Actually, quite a lot. The reason for this will require some explanation as we consider how we are meant to read these chapters.

## *The Story of the Garden of Eden*

Genesis 2 and 3 include the story of Adam and Eve's formation, God's commandment regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and Adam and Eve's choice to disobey God. These stories are familiar enough to most of us. What is important to consider, however, is when these stories were written and by whom. Jewish and Christian tradition hold that Moses was the author of the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah or Pentateuch. At the very least, we can say there is an implied author of Genesis 2 and 3 who wrote these chapters when much of what we read later in the Torah had already taken place (for example, the crossing of the Red Sea, giving of the Ten Commandments, and the construction of the ark of the covenant and tabernacle). When the author, whom we shall refer to as Moses, composed Genesis 2 and 3, therefore, he was aware of Israel's worship, including its places, leaders, objects, and actions. We should not be surprised, then, that the author refers to these things when he composes the story of Eden.

We can consider an example from an even earlier section of the book of Genesis, chapter 1. In verse 14 of this chapter, God says,

"Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for *signs* and for *seasons*, and for days and years . . ."[3] The Hebrew words for "signs" and "seasons" that Moses has chosen to use in this passage are significant. The word "signs" is the plural form of a Hebrew word that refers to something that reveals God's glory. For example, in Exodus 4 God tells Moses that he will do "signs" to show Pharaoh, king of Egypt, that he is the true God:

"If they will not believe you," God said, "or listen to the first *sign*, they may believe the latter *sign*. If they will not believe even these two *signs* or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground." (Exod 4:8–9)

The fact that the lights God places in the heavens in Genesis 1 are to serve as "signs" would have significance to Moses's first audience.

In the same way, the Hebrew word translated "seasons" in Genesis 1:14 is regularly used to refer to worship. While we think of four seasons (winter, spring, summer, and fall), the Israelites were called by God to build the rhythms of their lives around worship celebrations or "feasts." For example, in Leviticus 23:2, the Israelites are reminded that they are to keep various feasts as a way of obeying the Lord: "These are the appointed *feasts* of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed *feasts*." The word translated into English as "feasts" is the same word translated as "seasons" in Genesis 1:14. Looking back at that verse, then, it appears that in Genesis 1:14 Moses associates the signs and seasons (feasts) of Day Four of creation with Israel's worship practice. It is not surprising that Moses would make such a reference in order to show his audience (Israelites wandering in the wilderness) that God actually created the world in a way that reflects their worship practices. The same can be said for God's rest on the seventh day of creation, which became the basis of the fourth of the Ten Commandments.[4]

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[3] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

[4] Exod 20:8-11.

## *Worship in the Garden of Eden*

Our purpose in this essay, then, is to explore a small but familiar section of Scripture, the story of the garden of Eden (Gen 2-3), to see how it introduces biblical teaching on worship. This passage is not usually listed as a central or even secondary passage on the Bible's teaching on worship. Surprisingly, however, it is rich in worship language and imagery, setting the stage for much of what comes later in the Bible.

A first important observation about the inspired author's description of the garden of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3 is that it is meant to allude to the *place* of Israel's worship, which is the tabernacle described later in the Pentateuch.[5] While this allusion might be unfamiliar to twenty-first-century readers, it was quite obvious to Moses's first audience. For example, the tabernacle was entered from the east.[6] This meant that to move towards God's presence in the tabernacle, Moses or the high priest would move from east to west. In the same way, the entrance to the garden of Eden was on the east, guarded after the fall of the first humans by angelic cherubim with a flaming sword.[7] Important also is that the entrance to the holiest place in the tabernacle (the "holy of holies") required one to pass through a curtain, on which were embroidered cherubim.[8] And the ark of covenant, which was kept in the holiest place, had cherubim on its lid.[9]

These allusions include both specific or "key" words that are shared between the story of Eden and passages later in the Pentateuch ("East," "Cherubim"), and also the broader imagery that the tabernacle was presumably built on the model of the garden of Eden. There is much other evidence to support this observation. For example, one of the rare words used in Genesis 3:8 is a Hebrew verb form meaning that Adam and Eve heard God "walking" in the garden. The form of the word implies this walking was a habitual practice, not a one-time occurrence.

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5 See Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies 9* (1981):19; Idem., *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 86. See also John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, Frank A. Gaebelein and Richard P. Polcyn, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 43, and T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 131-32.

6 For example, Exod 38:9-20, especially verse 13.

7 Gen 3:24.

8 Exod 26:31-37.

9 Exod 25:18-22.

Interestingly, the verb in this form is used only two other times in the Pentateuch. One is in Leviticus 23:12, in which God tells the Israelites: "And I will *walk* among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people." In the same way that God habitually walked with Adam and Even in the garden, so here he promises Israel he will walk with them.[10] Also, among the worship *objects* in the tabernacle, was a lampstand that is described as being like a tree, having branches and clusters of fruit (almond) blossoms on it, reminiscent of the trees that play such an important role in the story of the garden of Eden (e.g., Gen 2:9).[11]

As noted above, there are three primary meanings of the biblical words associated with worship. One of these is the broad meaning of service. Israel's worship is often described as service in the first five books of the Bible. For example, in Exodus 3:12, God tells Moses that Israel will "worship" (literally, "serve"; the Hebrew word translated here is *'abad*) God on Mt. Horeb: "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall *serve* (*'abad*) God on this mountain." The New International Version (NIV) translates the word *'abad* as "worship" – Israel will "worship" God on this mountain (Horeb).[12]

The story of Eden contains other words that hearken to Aaron and the high priests' *leadership* of Israel's worship in the tabernacle. For example, the story somewhat surprisingly mentions "gold" in one of the lands through which a river of Eden flows (2:11-12; the Pishon flows through the land of Havilah where there is good gold). Israel's worship *objects*, as detailed in Exodus 25-40, were often made with gold (for example, the ark of the covenant; the table; the lampstand). Gold was also used for the priestly vestments that Israel's priests wore when they entered the tabernacle. These vestments included a precious stone, "onyx," which is also mentioned in the story of Eden (Gen 2:12).[13] It is significant, also, that God clothes Adam and Eve with "garments of skins" (Gen 3:21), which parallel the garments that Israelite priests were

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[10] See also Deut 23:14.

[11] Exod 25:31-40

[12] It is noteworthy that the garden of Eden is pictured as a raised place from which various rivers flow out. The book of Exodus pictures Israel's worship on a mountain in Exodus 3:12 and 15:17.

[13] Exod 25:7; 28

required to wear when they ministered in the tabernacle (Exod 28:4).[14]

There are also *action* words in the story of Eden that connect it to Israel's later worship. One of these is the word "to command" (2:16). Even a cursory reading of the Pentateuch shows how common this word is, including in its noun form ("commandment"). Just as Adam and then Eve were given a commandment by God, so Israel is given various commandments as part of their covenant relationship with the Lord (e.g., Exod 20:6). Likewise, the word for "rest" occurs in Gen 2:15: "The Lord God took the man and put (literally, "rested") him in the garden of Eden." The same Hebrew word is used in Exodus 20:11 and 33:14. For example, in the former, God "rests" after the six days of creation, and in the latter, God tells Israel that he will give them "rest."

The *action* word "serve" plays an important though somewhat hidden role in the story of Eden. We meet the word first in Genesis 2:15, where it is typically translated as "work": "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *work* (*'abad*) it and keep (*shamar*) it."[15] Interestingly, these same words are used in chapter 3, after the "fall" of Adam and Eve. In Genesis 3:23, the Lord sends Adam forth from the garden of Eden "to work (*'abad*) the ground from which he was taken." Cain "works" the ground in the same way (Gen 4:2; 12), and Joseph (Gen 39:17) and Israel (Exod 1:13-14) both *'abad* (serve, as slaves) in Egypt. Later, after the crossing of the Red Sea, the Levites are appointed by God to serve (*'abad*) in the tabernacle (Num 3:5-10). And the word "keep" is used in Genesis 3:24 of the role of the cherubim, namely, to "keep" (guard) the way to the Tree of Life in the garden. Significantly, these words (serve and keep) are used together elsewhere in the Pentateuch only with regard to the duties of the Levites in the Temple.[16] Moses, therefore, portrays Adam's duty to "work and keep" as a type of priestly role.

Other *action* words that connect the story of Eden to Israel's later

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[14] The same word for garments is used in both Gen 3:21 and Exod 28:4. See also Lev 8:7,13. The Israelites were also commanded not to approach an altar naked (Exod 20:26), connecting a key theme of the story of the Garden of Eden to later commands regarding Israel's worship.

[15] While "it" is typically taken to be the "garden," there is a disagreement in gender between, the words; "garden" is masculine while "it" is feminine. An ancient Jewish commentary known as Targum Neofiti solved the apparent grammatical problem by translating the phrase "to toil in the Law and to observe its commandments" (Martin McNamara, trans., *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis* in *The Aramaic Bible, Vol. 1A* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 58).

[16] Alexander, *Paradise*, 21. See Num 3:7-8; 8:26; 18:5-6.

worship include "to dwell," "to listen to the voice," and "to touch." The verb "to dwell" is used in Genesis 3:24, where we are told that the Lord "caused to dwell" the cherubim to guard the way back into the garden. The word "to dwell" is the root of the familiar word "shekinah," which refers to the glorious presence of God (e.g., Exod 24:16). In Hebrew, "to listen to the voice" is a way of speaking of obedience. For example, in Exod 15:26, the Lord says to Israel,

> "If you will diligently *listen to the voice* of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer."

We read the same phrase in Genesis 3:8, where Adam and Eve "heard the sound" of the Lord God walking in the garden. Finally, the serpent's deceitful words to Adam and Eve regarding how they were not "to touch" the tree of life are echoed in Leviticus, where Moses gives the Israelites commands about what they should not touch (e.g., Lev 5:2-3).

## *Conclusion*

The story of the garden of Eden has been written with Israel's worship in view. Israel's worship was characterized by specific places, appointed leaders, actions, and objects. Moses, the implied author of the Pentateuch, portrays the garden of Eden as a prototype of the tabernacle, with Adam the first priest. God dwells in the garden in the same way he would later dwell in the tabernacle.

These observations show us that God's plans from the beginning included worship. Before the fall of humans, God created an environment in which worship was possible, and gave to humans the task of offering worship. After the fall, when God constituted Israel as a nation and made his covenant with them, he established their worship based on the garden of Eden. Israel would worship in the tabernacle, built on the prototype of the garden, with Adam serving as the first worship leader (priest). Israel's worship, then, was a means of overcoming the fall and restoring them to Eden.

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore Jesus's and the early Christians' relationship to Israel's worship. Suffice it to say that in Jesus

Christ all of Israel's worship practices found their fulfillment. Early Christians recognized Christ as this fulfillment and ordered their own gatherings with him at the center. For example, not only was Jesus the fulfillment of Israel's tabernacle and temple (John 2:18-22), but his disciples, the church, took on that role as well (1 Cor 3:16-17), and served as a kingdom of priests (1 Pet 2:9). God would dwell with his people through his Holy Spirit, who brought union of believers with Jesus Christ, the true temple. In the same way, Jesus fulfilled the sacrificial actions and feasts and festivals that Old Testament worship, and worship in the garden, foreshadowed (1 Cor 5:7).

In light of this fulfillment, it is not surprising that the garden of Eden is alluded to in the last chapters of the Bible. In Revelation 21-22, the New Jerusalem is filled with gold and precious stones, with no need for a temple because the Lord God and the Lamb dwell in it. The river of the water of life flows from it and the tree of life is there. "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him."[17] May we, like Adam and Eve before the fall, recognize the presence of God among us and learn to worship him in spirit and truth.

**Recommend Resources**

T. D. Alexander. *From Paradise to Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002.

Umberto Cassuto. *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*. Jerusalem: Magnus Press, 1978.

John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995.

Gordon J. Wenham. *Word Biblical Commentary vol. 1. Genesis 1-15*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987.

[17] Rev 22:3; see also 7:15.

*Worshiper of Apis*
limestone with pigment
New Kingdom, 19th dynasty, reign of Ramesses II
Saqqara, Egypt
ca. 13th century BC

Image courtesy of Merja Attia

# Idolatry: When Worship Goes Wrong

James M. Todd III*

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has left a lasting impression upon most of the world's population. The virus brought global chaos at a rapid pace and reminded us of our lack of control as our lives quickly turned from normal to chaotic. Trying circumstances like the coronavirus pandemic have a way of revealing the source of our security and hope. When people begin to feel insecure and anxious, they turn to what they believe will give them a renewed sense of security, comfort, and peace. In short, trying circumstances reveal the individuals, institutions, or items in which people trust. Although trials have a way of exposing the objects of our trust, we cultivate our allegiances and affections for these objects during the calm seasons of life. In these calmer seasons, we find our delight in them and, as a result, devote our time, resources, and commitment to them.

The biblical word for the giving of our affections, allegiance, time and service to someone or something is worship. Ralph Martin defines proper worship as "the dramatic celebration of God in his supreme worth in such a manner that his 'worthiness' becomes the norm and inspiration of human living."[1] Although the Bible does not offer a formal definition of worship, worship dominates the biblical story. As the Creator of all things, God alone is worthy of humanity's worship,

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1 Ralph Martin, *The Worship of God: Some Theological, Pastoral, and Practical Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 4.

and consequently, he demands to be worshipped exclusively (Ps 86:9; Isa 42;8; Mark 12:30). The biblical story highlights humanity's inherent desire to worship someone or something, and unfortunately, the Bible shows that humans have a propensity to worship created things instead of their Creator (Rom 1:25). Humanity's failure to love and serve Yahweh exclusively is idolatry. Therefore, at its core, idolatry is simply misplaced worship, or as the title of this article suggests, worship gone wrong.

The biblical text provides vivid descriptions and extensive discussions of idolatry. Drawing from the Bible's rich reservoir, I will discuss the Bible's teaching regarding the nature and consequences of idolatry. Just in case we are tempted to believe idolatry occurred "back then" and no longer plagues humanity, I will draw application for the modern church throughout this article. Even with our modern technological advances, we continue to struggle with idolatry in ways that resonate with the struggles of Israel and the early church. Understanding the nature and consequences of idolatry can help us reject substitutes and cultivate a deeper affection for the only One worthy of our worship.

## *The Nature of Idolatry*

After God rescued Israel from Egypt, he brought them to Mt. Sinai where he entered a covenant with them. This covenant, often called the Mosaic or Sinai Covenant, contained numerous laws designed to distinguish Israel from the surrounding nations so they could mediate God's presence to the rest of the world (Exod 19:5-6). The first laws Yahweh gave Israel at Mt. Sinai were the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17), which served as a succinct summary of Israel's covenant obligations to their God. Significantly, the first two commands prohibited idolatry.[2] A close examination of these two commands reveals two common forms of idolatry in the ancient world: 1) idolatry as replacement, and 2) idolatry as misrepresentation. In what follows, we will examine both forms of idolatry by looking at select passages from the Old and New Testaments.

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[2] Historically, two numbering systems have been used to number the Ten Commandments. Catholics and Lutherans combine the prohibition of idolatry (Exod. 20:4-6) with the command not to have other gods (Exod. 20:3). Most other Christian traditions separate these two commandments. I am following the latter number system in this article.

## *Idolatry as Replacement*

The first command God gave Israel at Sinai reads, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3). Although given to Israel as part of their covenant, this command highlights God's desire for all humanity to worship him alone (Luke 4:8; Rom 11:36). This idea is repeated in various ways throughout the biblical story and finds its parallel expression in the command Jesus called the most important commandment: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30; cf. Deut 6:5). As with the greatest commandment, God's uniqueness as the One True God, who created all things, often serves as the basis for his demands for exclusive worship. In contrast to other so-called "gods," he alone created the world and all that is in it (Jer 10:11-13). Therefore, he alone is worthy of worship.

Sensitive readers of the Old Testament may quickly grow weary of reading about Israel's persistent idolatry. Though we find snapshots of their idolatry (Num 25:1-9) before their conquest of the land (Josh 1-12), the historical books of Judges through Kings provide us with the story of Israel's life in the land and their rampant idolatry. The book of Judges recounts their repeated relapse into idolatry after Yahweh's purging judgments, and the books of Samuel and Kings show how Israel and their kings rarely ceased worshipping other gods.

The name Baal is familiar to anyone who has read the Old Testament because this deity was often the primary object of Israel's worship in the land of Canaan. Israel worshipped Baal because their Canaanite neighbors worshipped him, a consequence Yahweh predicted when Israel refused to drive their pagan neighbors out of the promised land (Judg 2:1-5). Baal was the most prominent Canaanite god during Israel's time in the land. He was the Canaanite storm god who brought the rain needed to produce bountiful harvests in a culture dependent on agriculture. Unfortunately, Baal often replaced Yahweh as Israel's object of worship.

Perhaps the best example of Israel's rejection of Yahweh in favor of Baal took place during the reign of King Ahab in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Ahab's Phoenician wife Jezebel brought her Baal worship with her and thus made Baal the god of Israel, even constructing a temple for Baal in Samaria (1 Kgs 6:31-32). Yahweh, in

his zeal for his people's affections, raised up the prophet Elijah to bring judgment on the land and to confront Baal worship. The famous showdown on Mt. Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal served as the climax of this confrontation, and although many in Israel rejected Baal worship after this showdown, the rest of Kings shows Israel never ceased turning from Yahweh to idols.

Israel's adoption of their neighbor's gods brings us to the New Testament, where the major emphasis falls on the nations' worship of idols. As the good news of Jesus spread from Jews to Gentiles and from Jerusalem to Rome, the apostles encountered the issue of idolatry frequently. Although their gods were different, the various people groups of the Greco-Roman world worshipped a myriad of gods (Acts 17:16). As the early church proclaimed Jesus in this context, Christians called on these pagans to reject their idolatry and turn to the One True God (e.g. Acts 14:15-17; 17:16-34). The apostles' proclamation of Jesus as the One True God led to persecution on more than one occasion as they interfered with the rampant idol worship (e.g. Acts 16:16-24; 19:21-41).

Because they were surrounded by rampant idolatry, the early church faced the temptation of worshipping other gods instead of Christ. The various authors of the NT Epistles reminded their readers of their former idolatry before coming to Christ (1 Thess 1:9) and often commanded their readers to avoid idolatry as they followed Christ (1 Cor 10:14; 1 John 5:21). Paul's first letter to the Corinthians addresses several problems arising from idolatrous worship practices in the city of Corinth (chs. 8-10). These practices created difficult situations for the Corinthians and even led to divisions in their church. In the end, Paul reminded the Corinthians that idolatry is incompatible with Christian living (1 Cor 5:9-11; 6:9-11).

The New Testament does give an additional nuance to idolatry by explicitly connecting idolatry with the love of money. Concerning this connection, Brian Rosner writes, "the NT unambiguously judges only one thing to be idolatry, outside of the literal worship of idols, namely greed."[3] On two occasions (Eph 5:5 and Col 3:5), Paul identifies the sin of covetousness as idolatry. Jesus also characterized the love of money in a similar manner when he stated, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matt

[3] Brian S. Rosner, "Idolatry" in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 574.

6:24). Jesus's unambiguous rejection of anyone serving two masters stresses God's desire for exclusive worship. When we serve anyone or anything beside or before him, we commit idolatry by replacing him with an idol.

The biblical teaching on idolatry offers a rich resource for understanding idolatry in the modern world and in our own lives as Christians. Like ancient Israel, we have a propensity to reject God and worship something or someone else, yet unlike ancient Israel, we are not surrounded by Baal worship. So, what does idolatry as replacement look like today? Idolatry occurs when we give the devotion, service, and affection due God to anything or anyone else. Idolatry occurs when we elevate something or someone in our lives to a status of ultimate. Although each of us may be tempted by idolatry in different ways, we—like ancient Israel and the early church—are most tempted to worship the idols of our culture. So, what are some of the major idols in our culture?

First, the NT connection between covetousness and idolatry serves as a great example of Scripture's continued relevance. In our materialistic society, few sins rival the sin of greed. We are rarely content, and most Americans are on a quest for more and more "stuff" that supposedly makes us happy. Never content with what God has given us, we are constantly on the search for ways to make more money or attain more possessions. As God's people, we must reject the love of money and the lie that happiness consists in the abundance of our possessions. We must be vigilant to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, trusting God to meet our needs and provide for us according to his sovereign grace (Matt 6:33).

Second, American Christians are often tempted to give undo allegiance and trust to politicians or a political party. Living in a hyper-politically-charged society presents a unique set of challenges for Christians who truly want to love their neighbors and do what is best for their country. However, we must be ever-vigilant to remind ourselves and to show the world that our hope is not in a political party or who occupies the West Wing; we must show the world that our hope is in the sovereign God who is the President of Presidents.

Third, we often look at Israel with consternation because of their ludicrous idolatry. They should have known that the gods of the nations were false gods who could not deliver them. However, I imagine if Israel could have looked forward in time, they would have looked at us with

equal dismay because perhaps the most common idol in our culture is the idol of self. Not only does narcissism run rampant, but it also is viewed by many as virtuous. This worship of self fails to acknowledge our role as creations and servants of the One True King and presents a major stumbling block to faithful Christian living. The church must continue to emphasize the second greatest commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

## *Idolatry as Misrepresentation*

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exod 20:4). This second command Yahweh gave Israel at Sinai represents a second form of idolatry, idolatry as misrepresentation. This type of idolatry takes place when a people claim to worship Yahweh but do so in a manner inconsistent with his nature and character. David Peterson notes, "In various ways the Bible makes it plain that worship is acceptable to God only if it is based on a true knowledge of God and of his will. Worship outside this framework is idolatrous."[4] Surface readings of the Old Testament often miss this type of idolatry, but a familiarity with the worship practices in the ancient Near East allows one to see how Israel occasionally attempted to worship Yahweh, but in so doing, misrepresented him.

The premier example of idolatry as misrepresentation occurred while Israel gathered at the base of Mt. Sinai. After receiving the Ten Commandments, Moses ascended the mountain to receive the two stone tablets from Yahweh (Exod 31:18). During his forty days on the mountain, the people grew impatient and demanded that Aaron make them a god who would "go before" them (Exod 32:1). Caving to their demands, Aaron led the people in constructing a golden calf, which the people began to worship through sacrifices and feasting (Exod 32:1-6).

As modern readers, this story seems somewhat peculiar. We wonder why Israel would so quickly forsake Yahweh, the One who delivered them from the powerful grip of Pharaoh and led them through the waters of the Red Sea to safety. With our twenty-first century lenses, Israel's actions seem ridiculous. However, if we try to understand Israel's ancient context, their actions seem less outlandish and very consistent

[4] David G. Peterson, "Worship," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 857.

with the practices of their ancient neighbors. When interpreted in the ancient context, the golden calf incident does not represent a replacement of Yahweh, but a misrepresentation of Yahweh. In other words, Israel did not construct the golden calf as a rival god to Yahweh; they constructed the golden calf as a representation of Yahweh.[5] As Douglas Stuart notes, Israel thought "they needed…real, tangible gods."[6] They were not satisfied with a God who "spoke out of the midst of the fire" but had no visible form (Deut 4:12); they wanted a god whom they could see and touch.

Unlike our modern context, where we drink deeply from the waters of anti-supernaturalism, Israel lived in a world where everything was animated by the gods. Israel had spent hundreds of years living in Egypt, a land full of gods who were represented by images, some of which were young bulls.[7] In contrast, Yahweh commanded Israel not to represent him with an image. Since he was the invisible God who created all things, representing him with an image of a created being was idolatry. Israel was not free to worship Yahweh as they pleased or according to the practices of their neighbors. They were to worship him as he instructed them at Mt. Sinai. Ironically, the golden calf represents one of the most significant breaches of the proper worship due Yahweh. Unfortunately, Israel's preoccupation with visible images did not stop when they left Sinai but continued throughout the Old Testament and perhaps provided a rationale for why they so often chose to worship idols instead of Yahweh.

By the time of the first century, most Jews were vigilant in their rejection of idols. Ironically, when Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, stepped into this context, the invisible God took the form of a human being. Hence, Jesus told his disciples anyone who had seen him had seen the Father (John 14:9), and the author of Hebrews identified Jesus

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[5] Several clues in the text highlight Israel's worship of the golden calf as a misrepresentation of Yahweh. First, Aaron's announcement that the golden calf "brought [them] up out of the land of Egypt" (Exod 32:4) parallels Yahweh's self-identification in the prologue to the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2). Second, Aaron proclaimed "a feast to the LORD" (Exod 32:5), thus emphasizing that the festivities surrounding their worship of the golden calf were directed toward Yahweh. Finally, the people's actions toward the golden calf parallel earlier laws Yahweh had given them regarding true worship. The building of an altar, offering burnt offerings and peace offerings, and the meal (Exod 32:5–6) all have parallels in the laws of Exod 24:1–11.

[6] Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC 2 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 665.

[7] Stuart, *Exodus*, 670, discusses the importance of the bull in Egyptian thinking.

as the "exact imprint of his [God's] nature" (Heb 1:3). Jesus's imaging of the Father did not mean Jesus had physical features like the Father. In fact, Jesus stated that God was spirit (John 4:24). Jesus's reflection of his father was connected to his nature, character, and works. Anyone who saw the ways of Jesus saw the ways of the Father.

The New Testament also offers glimpses into the worship practices of the Greco-Roman world, and like their ancient counterparts, the nations of the first century continued to represent their gods with images (Acts 17:16, 23). It does not seem that the early church was tempted to misrepresent God with images as Israel had been. Instead, the biggest challenge for the early church—not only in the first century, but throughout the first four or five centuries—was properly understanding the identity of Jesus Christ and his relationship to the other two persons of the Trinity: the Father and the Holy Spirit. As the message of Christianity began to spread, some teachers began to teach false doctrines about Jesus Christ, doctrines which either denied his full humanity or his full deity. The apostles and later Christians took these heresies very seriously because they recognized the dangers associated with misrepresenting Jesus.

Several New Testament books address false teachers and their toxic doctrines, but the books of Colossians and 1 John serve as good examples of how the apostles attacked these heresies. Both Paul and John in their respective books attacked heresies that misrepresented the person and work of Christ (Col 2; 1 John 2:18-27). The peddlers of these false teachings had infiltrated the churches and were leading some members of the church astray. Therefore, these apostles wrote about Jesus's true identity in order to combat the heresies (Col 1:15-20; 2:9-10; 1 John 1:1-4; 4:1-3). They both underscore the seriousness of such misrepresentations and call their readers to embrace sound doctrine leading to godliness.

Modern Christians are not immune to this same type of idolatry. Although disagreement exists among Christians regarding the use of images in worship, the ever-present danger of making God in the image of our culture remains.[8] Israel's representation of Yahweh as a calf reflected their surrounding culture's propensity to represent their gods with tangible images. The false teachers in the early church also represented Christ in ways more palatable for their first-century culture. Both

[8] For a brief discussion of the use of images in Christian worship, see James M. Todd III, *Sinai and the Saints: Reading Old Covenant Laws for the New Covenant Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 193-198.

examples should serve as warnings for modern Christians. Our temptation is to make God in the image of our culture.

How does this look for modern Christians? First, studies have shown the different ways Americans view "god," and these conceptions do not always mirror the biblical text.[9] For example, many Americans view God as a god who values their personal happiness above all else. They also view god as a distant god who rarely intervenes in the affairs of life and who would certainly not pour out his wrath on sin.[10] Both of these conceptions are skewed to our culture and do not reflect the biblical picture of God who is intricately involved in the lives of individuals and the world (Ps 139) and who is more concerned with his people's holiness than he is with their happiness and comfort (Heb 12:3–11).

Second, like the early church, modern Christians must always battle heresies related to the identity of Jesus Christ. More obvious heresies can be found in the teachings of Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses, both of which relegate Jesus to the status of a created being, thereby denying his full deity. More accepted misrepresentations of Jesus can be found in the so-called "Prosperity Gospel," which relegates the significance of Jesus's work to one's personal happiness and prosperity. Misunderstanding of Jesus's person and work have serious repercussions for the life and health of the church. Like the apostles and the early church, the modern church must take such misrepresentations seriously and confront them with the utmost vigor.

Finally, and closely related to the last point, the church often misrepresents God by ignoring or misunderstanding the doctrine of the Trinity. We serve the Triune God who exists in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person plays an important role in the creation and sustenance of the Universe, the redemption of the church, the ongoing life of the church, and in the future restoration of all things. Many Christians cannot articulate an orthodox view of the Trinity, and therefore do not have a sufficient knowledge of God to correct false conceptions of him. The recent popularity of *The Shack* among Christians confirms both the rampant ignorance and lack of concern in the church regarding this central Christian doctrine.

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[9] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in their book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005) coined the phrase "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" to describe American teenagers' common conception of God at the time of their research.

[10] See "Joel and Victoria Osteen Talk About Jesus" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAFxxZ4qRPg (Accessed June 24, 2020).

## *The Consequences of Idolatry*

The biblical story's focus on idolatry not only helps us understand the nature of idolatry, but it also explicates the consequences of idolatry. Although numerous consequences are illustrated and explained in the biblical story, I will focus on two major consequences in this section. First, idolatry produces a host of other sins. In other words, *improper worship leads to improper living*. For example, idolatry and social injustice were the two major sins the prophets repeatedly preached against (e.g. Isa 1; Amos 5:10-15; Mic 3). As the Israelites rejected Yahweh and turned to the idols of the nations, they also rejected the justice and righteousness of Yahweh and began to practice injustice and all forms of evil in their society. Such a connection between idolatry and other sins explains why Jesus gave two commandments when asked about the most important command (e.g., Mark 12:28-31). The love of God (the greatest commandment) provides both the motivation and the criteria for loving one's neighbor (the second greatest commandment). When a person or a society skips the first, they pervert or neglect the second. Paul appears to operate on this same premise in Romans 1:18-32 when he identifies lustful impurity and host of other sins as products of idolatry (vv. 24-25, 28-32). Paul's emphasis on sexual immorality in this passage further underscores the regular association of idolatry and sexual immorality in the biblical story.[11] Finally, Paul's statement that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils" clearly conveys this truth (1 Tim 6:10), and our culture supplies us with regular examples of how an abundance of toxic fruit grows from the stems of greed and covetousness.

The close relationship between idolatry and other sins is instructive for the modern church. At this moment, discussions of social justice pervade the national attention. The protests and counter-protests revolving around the murder of George Floyd have brought the issues of racism and police brutality to the forefront of our attention. The church cannot turn a blind eye to these issues, but as the church, we must also remember that even when we agree with the culture's stance on an issue, we will still be countercultural in our solution to these issues. Regardless of the social issue, the solution begins with the proper worship of the One True God. As the church, we must recognize and proclaim that the greatest problem for individuals and for society is

[11] Rosner, "Idolatry," 572–573.

the sin of idolatry. When we fail to worship God with all our being, injustice, hatred, and chaos proceed. The church must show the culture true justice and righteousness can only be found when Christ rules in the hearts of his people. Therefore, the church has the unique opportunity to provide an example of justice, righteousness, and peace as we love Christ more fully, and out of our love for Christ, we will have the motivation, power, and criteria to love our neighbors well. We must always resist the temptation to remain silent about Christ's lordship while taking a stand on social issues.

The second consequence of idolatry is God's judgment. The Old Testament gives innumerable examples of God's judgment of Israel when they turned their backs on him and pursued the gods of the nations. Israel experienced defeat before their enemies, famine, disease, and eventually exile because they refused to remove their idols and devote themselves completely to their God. The prophets did not bridle their tongues when they preached against Israel's rampant idolatry. They condemned the people, compared idolatry to adultery and prostitution (Jer 3:6-14; Ezek 16; Hos), and mocked the idols and their worshippers (Isa 41:21-29, 44:9-20; Jer 10:1-10). Likewise, the apostles, in their letters to various churches, not only reiterated God's judgment of idolatry (e.g., Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor 6:9-10), but they also reserved their harshest words and promised the most severe judgment to false teachers who misrepresented the truth of Jesus Christ and his gospel (2 Pet and Jude). The biblical story ends with the New Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth. In his description of the New Jerusalem, John emphasizes God's presence with man in the restored creation (Rev 21:1-4), but he also highlights idolaters as those who will be excluded from the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:8, 22:14-15), thus experiencing the greatest judgment of all, separation from the goodness, beauty, and grace of the One True God.

God's wrath and judgment are not popular topics in the West, but if the church faithfully represents God, she must proclaim God's judgment in an idolatrous culture. God does not sit apathetically as multitudes of people reject their Creator and worship created things. He actively pours out his wrath on those who reject him, and often, God's judgment does not look like fire and brimstone. Instead, Paul identifies God's judgment on idolatry as a "handing over" of people to their sinful passions and lusts (Rom 1:18–32). Because sin is self-destructive, God's handing over of individuals and societies to their own devices produces

dire consequences. Thankfully, as believers, who continue to battle idolatry in our own hearts and need God's daily grace, God has already judged our idolatry by sending Christ to die as a substitution for our sins (2 Cor 5:21). We do not stand as those who have somehow found a cure for idolatry by our superior character or intelligence; instead, we stand as those whom God has rescued from idolatry and called to himself so that we might proclaim his praises both now and forevermore. Thankfully, God has not left us alone to accomplish this task, but he has given us his Spirit to empower us to live faithful lives.

## *Conclusion*

In Jeremiah 2:13, Yahweh speaks the following words through his prophet, "for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water." This imagery highlights the utter emptiness of idolatry. In fact, the imagery of this verse illustrates Yahweh's statement in 2:11: "my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit." As Israel had exchanged the glory of God for futile idols, whenever God's people allow idolatry to creep into their hearts, they are exchanging the most valuable for the worthless. Therefore, the greatest cure for idolatry is regular meditation on the greatness and glory of our Triune God. As we study God's Word and truly understand how transcendent, unfathomable, and overwhelming our God is, our heart will find its joy in him and in him alone, and we will be less tempted to worship the fleeting and futile things our world holds out to us as substitute gods. May our lives daily echo the cry of Revelation 5:13: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

**Recommended Resources**

G. K. Beale. *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008.

Timothy Keller. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters.* New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2009.

Richard Lints. *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015.

Brian S. Rosner. *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.

_____. "Idolatry" in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000.

# Psalm-shaped Worship: Reflections on Faithful Worship in the Psalms

Eric Bolger*

## *Introduction*

The Book of Psalms is well known as the prayer book of Christians and Jews. Its 150 psalms explore the depths of human relationship with God, and therefore of human worship. This essay aims to reflect on some of the ways the Psalms shape (or should shape) our worship as Christians.

Worship is a central part of human relationship with God. David Peterson defines worship as "an engagement with God on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible."[1] The Psalms teach us how to engage with God. Often this engagement is surprising, as in the psalms of lament, in which the psalmist outlines a complaint against God, such as for God's slow response to his suffering. Other times this engagement is what we typically think of when we consider worship, that is, giving praise and honor to God. The beauty of the Psalms is that they encompass the entirety of our lives—the

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[1] David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 20.

easiest and the most difficult times—and thereby show us how to engage with God in every moment and circumstance.[2]

In this essay, we will explore a few central ways in which the Psalms instruct us with regard to our worship of God. We will begin with a look at the shortest psalm, one that gives us surprisingly deep insight into how we are to engage with God.

## *Psalm 117: A Summary of Biblical Worship*

Psalm 117 offers one of the most concise and profound statements of worship in the Psalms:

> 1 Praise the LORD, all nations!
> Extol him, all peoples!
>
> 2 For great is his steadfast love toward us,
> and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.
> Praise the LORD![3]

This short psalm summarizes the essence of human response to God. First, the psalm invites (literally, commands) the reader to "praise the LORD." In Hebrew, this phrase is "hallelu-jah," with "jah" being shorthand for the sacred and covenantal name of God in the Old Testament (Yahweh). The reader is invited to praise not just any god, but Israel's God, the God who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Immediately we see that worship is not simply a feeling without an object, as if we can simply experience worship without directing it to the one who alone is worthy. Nor can we rightly define for ourselves the object of our worship. Israel certainly found this out in Exodus 32 when they built the golden calf and called it their "god" (or "gods"). God's displeasure with Israel's actions was clear and impactful. Rather, biblical worship has as its object Israel's God, who reveals himself more fully through Jesus Christ[4] as the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Psalm 117 also highlights *who* is called to worship. It is not just those who follow this God, but all nations and all peoples. Worship of God

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[2] ". . . in both Testaments [worship] is often shown to be a personal and moral fellowship with God relevant to every sphere of life," (See Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 283).

[3] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

[4] See Heb 1:1-3.

is not simply a personal and private matter. The God of the Bible, revealed most fully in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ, is worthy of worship from all humans, whether believing or not, as Paul affirms of Jesus Christ in Philippians 2: "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."[5] Psalm 117 makes this clear by calling "all nations" and "all peoples" to worship God.

Significantly, Psalm 117 also gives the reason for our worship. In verse 2, the psalmist tells why we are called to worship the LORD: "For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever." The two terms, steadfast love and faithfulness, are consistently found together in the Psalms, as well as in key sections of the Old Testament. They are rooted in God's revelation of his character to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7, in which God passes by Moses and proclaims to him: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love* and *faithfulness*, keeping *steadfast love* for thousands." These two terms are so important in the Psalms that it is vital to discuss their meaning. Together they serve as the bedrock for Israel's, and later for Christians', worship of the LORD.

Steadfast love is a love that is promised, a covenantal love. We see an analogy in wedding ceremonies, where couples promise to keep a marriage covenant of exclusive love for each other. But God's covenantal love is different from human love in one vital way: God always keeps his promises. For this reason, the psalmists can and do appeal to God's steadfast love whenever they are in trouble, and they extol his steadfast love in songs of praise. For example, in Psalm 36:5 the psalmist praises God: "Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds." As is often the case, in this passage the word "faithfulness" forms a biblical pair with steadfast love: God is faithful in the sense that he keeps his promises. So steadfast love and faithfulness go hand in hand. When Christians worship, it is these aspects of God's character that form the basis of their worship, since worship expresses a relationship with God, and the terms steadfast love and faithfulness are relational terms. As Psalm 117:2 says, God's steadfast love is "great" and his faithfulness "endures forever."

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[5] Phil 2:10-11.

## *Learning to Relate to God Honestly*

The most common type of psalm in the Book of Psalms is the psalm of lament. A psalm of lament may be personal or corporate (prayed on behalf of the community of believers). Psalms of lament provide words for us to engage with God when everything is not as it should be. Psalm 13 serves as a typical example:

1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
2 How long must I take counsel in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
3 Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;
light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,
4 lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him,"
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.
5 But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
6 I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

In this psalm, there are three primary movements that inform our engagement with God and thus our worship. First, in verses 1 and 2, the psalmist seems to question God: How long will this suffering go on? How long will you seem distant and appear to have forgotten me? How long will this sadness persist? We may call this part of a lament the complaint. What is important to point out is that this honest questioning of God is offered not in unbelief, but in faith. Lament prayer is a way of engaging with God about our struggles, alone or with others. As such, it should form part of our worship practice as Christians.

Second, in verses 3 and 4, the psalmist asks God to intervene in his situation: "Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death." We may call this the petition. The psalmist here invites God to respond to his plight so that his "enemy" may not rejoice in his downfall: "lest my enemy say, 'I have prevailed over him,' lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken." The psalmist's downfall is understood to reflect poorly on God, which the psalmist uses as motivation for God to answer his prayer.

Finally, the psalmist expresses praise in verses 5 and 6. The praise is

for God's steadfast love, just as we saw in Psalm 117: "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation." The psalmist then indicates his intention to "sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me." The psalmist's worship is a response to God's steadfast love, experienced in God's answering of his prayer in times of trial.

Prayers of lament challenge us at a number of levels. First, they call us to an honest engagement with God that does not ignore our suffering. Too often, such engagement is viewed as antithetical to worship: worship is viewed only as speaking nicely to and about God. But the psalms of lament teach us that there is a place for making known to God our struggles, crying out to him for help, and then praising him for his steadfast love and faithfulness. Sometimes this praise is in response to God's gracious deliverance, and other times it is anticipation that God will indeed answer because he has always been faithful to do so. Second, the psalms of lament encourage us to help others in the journey of lament. Suffering is a part of life, and we can help others recognize that Scripture, the Psalms in particular, give us words to pray in the midst of suffering. Significantly, the Book of Psalms as a whole shows the same movement as an individual psalm of lament,[6] that is, a move from complaint (more common early in the book) to praise (more common later in the book; see Psalms 146-150 for the concluding praise).

The movement we see in the Book of Psalms has been described by Walter Brueggemann as a movement from orientation through disorientation to new orientation.[7] Brueggemann sees Psalm 73 as exemplary of this movement. This psalm begins with a sense of certainty on the part of the psalmist: "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (73:1). Here the psalmist affirms God as a good God who rewards the godly. This affirmation echoes the introductory psalm, Psalm 1, which affirms that the one who puts God's instruction (Word)

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6 The Book of Psalms consists of five smaller "books" (Psalms 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150), each ending with a doxology or special word of praise. It has an introduction (Psalms 1-2) and a conclusion (Psalms 146-150). The overall movement of the book is from lament (prayers of complaint to God) to praise, though the introduction includes a psalm of wisdom (Psalm 1) and a psalm about royal kingship (Psalm 2). For a helpful introduction to the Book of Psalms, see Mark D. Futato, *Transformed by Praise: The Purpose and Meaning of the Psalms* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002).

7 Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 189-213.

first will be blessed and grow up like a tree planted by streams of water, always healthy. This perspective Brueggemann calls orientation. In orientation, all things work out for the faithful and the wicked are punished for their deeds. The world is a well-ordered and predictable place.

It doesn't take long for the psalmist to confess that this is not his current experience. In verses 2-16 of Psalm 73, the psalmist describes his struggle with the fact that the wicked are actually prospering, leaving him devastated: "For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked . . . All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence" (Ps 73:3,13). The psalmist's suffering has provoked a sense of disorientation. What about the well-ordered world of Psalm 1 and Psalm 73:1? How can those who reject God enjoy prosperity and health? Why aren't those who follow God the ones who enjoy blessing? These questions tell us that Psalm 73 is a psalm of lament, like Psalm 13. The psalmist has presented to God his complaint.

As is typical of psalms of lament, the psalm resolves with a renewed worship of God. What Brueggemann shows, though, is that this renewal has led to a change of heart on the part of the worshiper. The psalmist affirms that it was when he entered God's dwelling place (sanctuary) that he saw the truth of the matter: "until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their (those who reject God) end" (73:17). Even more significantly, the psalmist then confesses a simple but profound change from his statement in verse 1 that God is good to the pure in heart. In Psalm 73:28, the psalmist says:

> But for me it is good to be near God;
> I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
> that I may tell of all your works.

Rather than concern to experience God's goodness as a result of his faith, the psalmist now affirms that what matters is that he is near God (or God is near to him). Rather than the *blessings* of God, the psalmist now desires *God*. What a significant change! This new orientation is the result of struggling through suffering with God, ending with what Brueggemann calls the "celebration" of God's steadfast love.[8] Such a celebration is seen in many psalms, most notably the psalms of ecstatic praise that close the Book of Psalms (Pss 146-150).

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[8] Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 199.

This movement from orientation (Ps 1), through disorientation (psalms of lament, such as Ps 73), to a new orientation (Pss 146-150), characterizes not just Psalm 73 but the entire Book of Psalms. In fact, it characterizes the entire Bible, most significantly the life of Jesus Christ, who cried out in lament on the cross and then experienced with his followers the new orientation of resurrection on Easter Sunday. With this in mind, we may now turn to a consideration of Jesus Christ in the Psalms.

## *Christ in the Psalms*

There is a sense in which the topic of Christ in the Psalms should be primary in any discussion of this book. The Book of Psalms is quoted extensively in the New Testament, typically as providing evidence that Jesus fulfills the expectations, including the details, of Israel's songbook. Sadly, approaches to the Psalms in churches often neglect this fact, so that the Psalms, while rightly used for personal and corporate worship, are not seen as connected to Jesus Christ, except in a few specific places.

To read the Psalms as about Jesus Christ may be called a "Christo-centric" reading.[9] Such a reading does justice to the New Testament and helps us to see a greater depth of meaning and significance in the Psalms. The psalms are seen not just as prayers to be prayed but as statements by and about Jesus Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes, "The Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word."[10] The Book of Psalms, then, is not just our prayer book, but also and more importantly it reveals Christ to us. A few brief examples will illustrate this understanding.

Psalm 22 is associated with Jesus Christ because its first lines were prayed by Jesus on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But the psalm in its entirety should be understood as an explanation of Jesus' life and prayer. The psalm moves from bitter lament in 22:1-21a to a song of praise for God's intervention in 22:21b-33. For example, in verses 22-24 the psalmist calls others to praise the LORD for his deliverance from his suffering:

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[9] See Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2000).

[10] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1954), 46. He adds, "Because Christ prays the prayer of the psalms with the individual and the congregation before the heavenly throne of God, or rather because those who pray the psalms are joining in with the prayer of Jesus Christ, their prayer reaches the ears of God. Christ has become their intercessor."

[22] I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
[23] You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
[24] For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him.

Jesus, who appeared forsaken by God on the cross, was delivered through the resurrection and now calls others to join in praising the God who did not "hide his face," but heard and responded when Jesus cried out to him. Jesus, then, becomes our example of worship and the one who is ultimately the subject of the Psalms.[11]

Another example is Psalm 72. This psalm is a royal kingship psalm, with the king of Israel as its subject. The psalmist, perhaps Israel's king himself, asks God to bless his rule:

[1] Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!
[2] May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!
[3] Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
[4] May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor!

Read Christo-centrically, these words may be understood to refer to Jesus Christ. Rather than an ancient prayer for a now forgotten king, the prayer teaches us about the one we worship, Jesus Christ. He is the one who cries out for and receives from God justice and righteousness. He is the one who takes up the case of the poor, who brings prosperity and righteousness, defending and delivering the poor and needy, and defeating those who oppress. Like the God to whom the Israelites cried out in the psalms of lament, Jesus hears the cries of his people and responds in steadfast love and faithfulness. He, therefore, is worthy of

[11] "Properly to pray the Psalms is to pray them in Jesus' name, because the voice in the Psalter is Christ's own voice. Christ is the referential center of the Book of Psalms," (Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, xvii).

our praise and worship. He is the Son who, on behalf of the Father, answers our lament.

A final example of Christ in the Psalms is Psalm 89. This long psalm begins with robust praise of God for his steadfast love and faithfulness:

> [1] I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD,
> forever;
> with my mouth I will make known
> your faithfulness to all generations.
> [2] For I said, "Steadfast love will be built up forever;
> in the heavens you will establish
> your faithfulness."

In many words, through verse 37, the psalmist rehearses God's goodness, understood as his faithfulness to his promise to the Davidic king. But in verse 38, the tone changes:

> [38] But now you have cast off and rejected;
> you are full of wrath against your anointed.
> [39] You have renounced the covenant with your
> servant;
> you have defiled his crown in the dust.

Through the end of the psalm the psalmist takes up a lament, asking God how long he will keep his face turned away: "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?" The end of the psalm does not resolve the lament, but leaves the issue open:[12]

> [50] Remember, O LORD, how your servants are mocked,
> and how I bear in my heart the insults of all the many nations,
> [51] with which your enemies mock, O LORD,
> with which they mock the footsteps of your anointed.

What is significant for our purposes is that the New Testament understands Jesus Christ as both the subject of the psalm and God's answer to the lament. Jesus is the anointed one (messiah) who is insulted and mocked. He is also the one who fulfills God's promises to Israel regarding a royal descendent of David, and thus the one who after

[12] The final verse of Psalm 89 is generally understood to be a doxology or word of praise added to mark the end of a scroll. The placement of the psalms we have considered is significant: Psalm 72 ends Book II of the Psalms, and Psalm 73 begins Book III. Psalm 89 is the final psalm in Book III.

many centuries demonstrates God's steadfast love and faithfulness. As the gospel of John puts it, "So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness" (John 1:14 (NLT)). Thus, we have another psalm about Jesus Christ, and one that returns us to the beginning of our journey in Psalm 117: praise the LORD all nations and peoples, for his steadfast love and faithfulness are great.

## *Conclusion*

The Book of Psalms has been a treasured guide to Christian worship through 2,000 years. It teaches how to engage with God, and thus to worship God. It shows who should worship God and for what reasons. It gives us words with which to pray and worship God when things aren't going as we think they should and helps us to see how an encounter with God, particularly in our suffering, can lead to a new and deeper understanding of our relationship with God. Finally, the Psalms point us to Jesus Christ, who is both the subject of the Psalms and the one whom they anticipate. It is appropriate to end this essay with the last words of the Psalms from Psalm 150:6, keeping in mind that they refer to Jesus Christ:

> *Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!*
> *Praise the LORD!*

**Recommended Reading**

Mark D. Futato. *Transformed by Praise: The Purpose and Message of the Psalms.* Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002.

Tremper Longman III. *How to Read the Psalms*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988.

Patrick D. Miller, Jr. *Interpreting the Psalms*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986.

David Peterson. *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992.

Patrick Henry Reardon. *Christ in the Psalms*. Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2000.

**Dayton Castleman**

*Tilting at Giants*

aluminum, steel, votive candles, glass votive holders, braided fishing line, steel cable, rigging hardware

30 x 100 x 10 feet

2006

Image courtesy of the artist.

Though the title, *Tilting at Giants*, references the famous scene from Miguel de Cervante's *Don Quixote*, the setting of the suspended windmills within the context of a church sanctuary cannot help but be read as an exploration of the Holy Spirit's movement (or lack thereof) in the Church and in corporate worship.

—Richard W. Cummings

# Establishing the Foundation: Biblical Worship[1†]

Constance M. Cherry[*]

## *Laying the Footing: Worship Grounded in God*

The starting place in understanding Christian worship is to recognize that worship flows from the person and work of God. God is the footing upon which our worship is laid. Three things are of note when we make this claim. First, worship begins with reflection on who *God* is rather than reflection on *us.* The revelation of God's nature forms the basis for all Christian worship. We do not begin by thinking about ourselves and what *we* want out of worship. Nor do we evaluate worship based entirely on what we receive from it. Rather, we consider who God is and God's expectations for worship. The Scriptures serve as the primary source for discovering God's idea for worship. Once we reflect on the scriptural view of God and seek to satisfy God's vision of worship, we will be able to evaluate worship's success on God's

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[1†] This essay originally appeared in *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010). Used by permission. The material has been slightly reformatted for publication in *Faithful Lives*.

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criteria, not our own. In this way, worship is grounded in God.

Second, worship that is grounded in God acknowledges that God initiates worship. God invites us to worship. Worship is an invitation, not an invention. We see this in John 4:23-24: "True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for *the Father seeks* such as these that worship him" (emphasis added). God the Father seeks us. We don't create worship; we don't manufacture services. Rather, we respond to a person. Effective worship is never a result of our efforts. Worship happens when we learn to say yes in ever-increasing ways to God's invitation to encounter him. This realization holds implications for the way in which we enter the sanctuary or worship center. Are we on time, or do we keep God waiting? Do we come with anticipation or out of duty? Do we greet our Lord as if he is truly present, or do we simply find a seat and settle down to take in the action?

We may have falsely assumed that *we* initiate services of worship, that *we* are responsible to generate our corporate encounters with the living God. But that would be an error in thinking. God always acts first. God approaches us, calls us, and invites us to the holy meeting between himself and his people. It was God who summoned Moses and the elders of Israel to the mountain where he established the covenant with Israel. It was God who acted first on the day of Pentecost. And it is God who likewise "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world . . . according to the good pleasures of his will . . . that we . . . might live for the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1: 4-5, 12).

Third, worship grounded in God is an eternal enterprise. Worship was occurring before God laid the foundations of the earth, "when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). Worship is the joyous duty of all Christians on earth who have "set our hope on Christ [that we] might live for the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:12), and of all those willing to "present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice…which is [our] spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). Finally, worship will be the way we spend eternity when we join the "many angles surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders . . . singing with full voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!'" (Rev. 5:11-12). When we gather for corporate worship, our adoration is a significant continuation of that which began before the foundations of the world were laid, that which occurs in heaven contemporaneous with our worship at any given moment,

and that which foreshadows the worship to come when Christ reigns. Worship is eternal.

What we establish at the outset is that our understanding of God and the way we engage worship are indefinitely connected. A.W. Tozer said it well:

> *What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us . . . [as] no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshipper entertains high or low thoughts of God. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech.*[2]

At the beginning, then, we must realize that worship is derived from the very nature of God, worship is a response to God's invitation, and worship is eternal (past, present, and future). Our understanding of Christian worship starts with our understanding of God. Only when we establish worship services on this foundation are we faithful and true to the character of worship.

With our footing poured, we are now ready to lay the foundation of worship—biblical principles that will provide us with a solid basis on which to construct services of worship.

## *Establishing the Foundation: Biblical Principles for Worship*

The Scriptures characterize worship using a number of central themes. These themes are prominent and run like a golden thread throughout the Old and New Testaments. This chapter will present six of these themes, each of which is significant to a biblical understanding of worship. The themes discussed are not exhaustive; more could be brought forward. In fact, dedicated worship architects must spend their lives pursuing greater understanding of the primary themes and principles pertinent to biblical worship, with the hope of designing and leading services that are pleasing to God. Biblical themes translate into principles that anchor Christian worship and keep it profoundly

[2] A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God, Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (New York, NY: HarperCollins. 1992), 9. Reprinted with permission.

true to God's expectations.

## *Theme one: Worship Is Centered in God's Act of Salvation*

As we have discovered, God initiates worship. This is in full keeping with God's character, for God is a person who acts first. There is no better depiction of this than the occasions when God intervened in the lives of his people in order to save them from self-destruction. Worship is fundamentally the result of, and response to, great saving events performed by God. For the Hebrews, the central saving event was the exodus; for Christians, it is the resurrection.

The Old Testament tells the story of God's people in need, crying out for deliverance from oppression at the hands of the Egyptians. The covenantal promise had been given to Abraham generations before Jacob and his twelve sons migrated to Egypt. After the death of the pharaoh who favored Joseph and his clan, the people of Israel found themselves in bondage and fragmented in purpose and vision. At just the right time from God's point of view, he intervened with a mighty saving act that defined Israel's history. The story as told in Exodus 1-15 is sometimes referred to as the Exodus Event. This term has come to summarize the mighty victory captured in the song sung afterward to the Lord by Moses and the Israelites:

> I will sing to the LORD,
> for he has trumped gloriously;
> horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.
>
> The Lord is my strength and my might,
> and he has become my salvation;
> this is my God, and I will praise him,
> my father's God, and I will exalt him (Exod. 15: 1-2)[3]

All the worship of Israel flowed from this singular event (and continues to do so), because the story of God's saving action is its centerpiece. Worship always begins with and focuses on what God has done to save his people.

A careful examination of Israel's cultic practices found in the Old

[3] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Testament demonstrates how the Exodus Event drove worship. The most direct evidence of this is the establishment of the Feast of Passover. As explained in Exodus 12, the story of Passover forms the inaugural worship event for the Hebrew people. This feast, which recalls God's saving action through the exodus, was an immediate and direct re-representation of the saving action of God. From the choice of lamb, to the blood on doorposts, to the menu of foods to be eaten and attire to be worn, God prescribed the worship practices of Israel from this event forward.

Next came the prototype for how meetings with Yahweh would transpire. Exodus 24 describes the basic components of Israelite worship: recognition of the law followed by sacramental ratification. At God's invitation, Moses built an altar at the foot of Mount Sinai. There, burnt offerings were presented to the Lord. The alter was consecrated with the blood of the sacrificial animals. Moses read the book of the covenant, the people promised obedience, and then Moses consecrated them with the blood from the altar—a symbolic action confirming the relationship between God and people. This sequence of word and symbolic action set the course for national convocations for centuries to come.

The establishment of subsequent national feasts, the detailed rules and regulations of cultic practices, the specifications for the tent of meeting, the orders concerning the attire and consecration of priests—all were an aftermath, in some measure, of God's saving action in the exodus.

It can be said that Old Testament worship was based on re-presentation. The various worship acts retold the story of God's rescue. Worship was, therefore, a testimony to God's action. Yet, it was more than that. The episodes of the story are first and foremost a story of God's self-revelation. As J. D. Crichton so aptly points out, "The history of salvation is not to be seen as a series of disparate events or as the mere record of what once happened. It is the record of God's self-disclosure, made in and through events, the disclosure of a God who gives himself. This is the deepest meaning of salvation history."[4]

The New Testament reports the story of a greater act of salvation than the exodus, that of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Son of God. The complete story of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, as told in the Gospels, is referred to as the Christ Event. The

[4] J. D. Crichton, "Israelite Worship as a Response to Salvation History," *in The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 2, Robert E. Webber, ed. (Nashville, TN: StarSong, 1994), 81.

Exodus Event uniquely foreshadowed the Christ Event, which in turn superseded it. The Christ Event was paramount in that it was God's saving act intended not only for the Hebrews, but for all who would come to believe, Jew and gentile alike. At just the right time from God's point of view, he intervened in human history with the mighty saving act that defined all of history from that point on. As Ralph P. Martin correctly notes,

> *There can be no doubt as to the center of gravity in New Testament teaching on worship. The lodestone which irresistibly draws the New Testament Church to the recognition of God's love and mercy is His saving action in the Son of His love. . . . Christian worship finds here its true center and its main inspiration, as it celebrates that mighty act of redemption in Christ—incarnate, atoning, and exalted.*[5]

Just as Moses and the Israelites celebrated the Red Sea rescue in song, so this story of the salvation of God in Christ provided texts for the New Testament communities to sing, such as this one:

> [Christ Jesus], though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
>
> but emptied himself
> taking the form of a slave
> being born in human likeness
>
> And being found in human form,
> he humbled himself
> and became obedient to the point of death—
> even death on a cross
>
> Therefore God also highly exalted him
> and gave him the name
> that is above every name,
>
> so that at the name of Jesus
> every knee should bend,
> in heaven and on earth and under the earth
>
> and every tongue should confess
> that Jesus Christ is Lords,

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[5] Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 16-17.

to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:6-11)[6]

Again, it is important to note that all of the worship of the early church flowed from the Christ Event and continues to do so. It forms the centerpiece of Christian worship. A study of the New Testament makes this abundantly clear.[7] According to Acts 2:42 (and elsewhere in the New Testament), the emphasis is on the word of God preached and the Word of God celebrated through the Eucharist. The first-century disciples "devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching [word] and fellowship, to the breaking of bread [Eucharist] and the prayers." The Old Testament prototype for worship through law and sacramental ratification was brought to perfection in Word and Table.

The Christ Event now drives worship, for the object of our worship is Jesus Christ, the content of our worship is the story of Jesus Christ, the word proclaimed in Christian worship is the gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and the sacramental "ratification" of our worship is our active participation at the Lord's Table, a celebration of the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ. The spoken word attests to Christ as Lord and victor through proclamation; the Eucharist offers a symbolic re-presentation of the same.

Christian worship, like Hebrew worship, is born out of God's saving action towards his own people. But acts of salvation alone do not constitute worship, for a needy party must receive the acts and offer a joyous response. When God's initiatives are acknowledged and received, worship begins to transpire.

## *Theme Two: Worship is Patterned in Revelation and Response*

God's saving acts were acts of self-revelation. God revealed himself in the burning bush, the plagues of Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, and his encounters with Moses at Sinai. God's truest self-revelation came in the form of Jesus Christ. Christ came to reveal the Father. Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Notice, however, that God's action invites a response. God's initiatives

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[6] For background on this and other New Testament hymns, see Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, chap. 4.

[7] In chapter 2 of *The Worship Architect*, the Christological nature of worship is examined in detail.

always result in an invitation to trust God and respond to and receive the action offered. This engagement of revelation/response forms the core of Christian worship. After all, "Worship is the response we make to the gifts of God."[8]

This pattern of revelation/response is found in many episodes throughout the Scriptures when people encountered God. God revealed himself, and a response was forthcoming, usually spontaneous and immediate. The classic example is that of Isaiah's vision in the temple (Isa. 6:1-8). The Lord, sitting in a high and lofty throne, was revealed to Isaiah; his presence filled the temple. Seraphs attended the Lord and sang the hymn of heaven, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the while earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). So powerful was the presence of God that the temple itself shook and was filled with smoke. This is an episode of God's revelation to Isaiah.

Yet it was a revelation that inspired a response. One cannot experience a visitation of God and not respond. What were Isaiah's responses to God's self-disclosure? First, there was an outcry of incredible shame and humility, expressed in the stark awareness that his mortal being could not bear to look upon the glory of God: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa.6:5). Isaiah's first response, then, was one of confession based on the disparity he sensed between God's holiness and his own sinfulness. God next revealed to Isaiah that his sins had been forgiven and that he had been made clean. How did Isaiah then respond? He answered with a spirit of obedience: "Here am I; send me!" (Isa. 6:8). Isaiah moved through a series of responses upon encountering God; he turned from "Woe is me!" to "Here am I; send me!" This is revelation that invites a response. In Isaiah's case, the response was repentance followed by obedience. Something proclaimed (revealed) and something acknowledged (response) are the heart and soul of the worship experience.[9]

The sequence of God-human exchange found most prominently in the Scriptures is that of revelation and response. Is it not appropriate then, that the prominent sequence for God-human exchange in worship is also revelation/response? Christian worship is always a response to truth, the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ. This sequence is the native pattern of worship: it is the natural result of what happens when

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[8] Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 16.

[9] Many more scriptural examples of worship as revelation/response are offered in chapter 5 of *The Worship Architect*.

humanity encounters God. It therefore forms the basis for the simplest twofold service, Word and Table. The word is revealed and worshippers respond with Eucharist (thanksgiving).[10] Revelation/response is the normative pattern of dialogue between God and the worshipping community. Ultimately, worship is a conversation between God and God's chosen people. There is a mutual exchange, a holy dialogue, an invested sharing back and forth in worship. The reciprocity inherent in a true worship experience is a beautiful thing in which to participate; it is a living, vital conversation, not a religious program.

True worship is never one-sided. It is not a matter of worshippers being preached at while they sit passively, hearing about God; nor is it one of forcing God to endure our wordiness and the little performances that we design to entertain God as if the success of worship depended on us. True worship is the experience of encountering God through the means that God usually employs, a conversation built on revelation/response.

Viewing worship as a conversation implies a relationship. It is this reality that leads us to the covenantal aspect of worship.

## *Theme Three: Worship Is Covenantal in Nature*

To say that worship is covenantal is to say that worship is built on a relationship—between God and God's people. Put in simplest terms, a covenant is a formal relationship between two parties who have committed to relate to one another in agreed-upon ways.

Covenants of a political nature have been in existence since the most ancient of times, forming the basis for relationships between groups of neighboring peoples. A covenant often took the form of a treaty, the purpose of which was to formalize what each partner would do for the other. Hence, the nature of the relationship was established in detailed terms. With the use of a covenant, relationships were formalized. The purpose of the covenant was to eliminate ambiguity and confusion concerning how the parties would relate to one another. It also articulated the allegiances that were expected. Treaties were typically ratified

[10] Though the Table of the Lord was the normative response to the word historically and remains so in many churches (see chap. 6 in *The Worship Architect*), alternative responses to the word will be discussed since many congregations do not celebrate weekly Eucharist (see chap. 7 in *The Worship Architect*).

with a sign act that served as a symbolic seal of the relationship.

In the Old Testament, the first time we encounter the word "covenant" is in the story of Noah and the great flood. God covenants with Noah, his descendants, and every living creature that never again would all flesh be destroyed by a flood (Gen. 6:18;9:9-11). The sign act that followed God's promise is his placement of the rainbow: "it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Gen. 9:13). The primary covenant established in the Old Testament is that of God with Abram. In fact, "the covenant," as it came to be known, consumes the entire history of God's activity with Israel from the time of Abram until the time of Jesus Christ. God chose to have a relationship with an entire people group beginning with a visitation to Abram. God appeared to Abram in the form of visions (see Gen. 15:1 and 17:1), making known to Abram the great gift that would come to him and his descendants by way of the covenant. God said:

> *I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God (Gen. 17:6-8).*

The covenant is the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's twelve sons, and their descendants. It is the story of covenant made, covenant broken (on the part of the people of Israel), and covenant upheld through the faithfulness of God in the midst of Israel's broken promises.

The sign act of the covenant immediately followed the promises of the covenant. The symbolic sign ratifying the covenant was circumcision (Gen. 17:10-14). It was the covenant, sealed by circumcision, that established the Hebrews as God's own people. There is a direct relationship between God's covenant and God's worship. This was the recurring theme throughout Israel's history: to worship God truly was to remain in covenant with God; to worship other gods was to break covenant with the one true God. Israel was instructed: "You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you" (Exod. 23:32-33). The singular, most significant feature of the covenant is that God pledged himself with

fidelity to only one people. Though God remains active in the histories of all nations under heaven, only one nation became "God's chosen people," and only one nation would receive the unrelenting, merciful, and trustworthy hesed[11] of the Lord. It was this nation, Israel, God's chosen people, that was invited into the worship relationship with the Creator on the basis of the covenant.

Of course it is the New Testament that describes fulfillment of the new covenant (the concept is introduced in Jeremiah 31) and proclaims the good news that God in his mercy through Jesus Christ has enlarged his chosen people group to include gentiles. The apostle Peter, writing to gentile believers, says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

God's plan for humankind before the foundation of the world was to have a relationship with all kinds of people. This is clear from Mary's song of praise after she, like Abram, received a vision of the promise of God (Luke 1:54-55). It was through her son, Jesus the Christ, that the new covenant would be instituted. At the circumcision of John the Baptist, his father Zechariah prophesied that the coming of the Savior, which John would announce, was a remembrance of God's holy covenant, "the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham" (Luke 1:73).

Jesus made it clear that his crucifixion would usher in the new covenant. Celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples the evening before his death, Jesus said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). Salvation had now come to all who would believe, Jew and gentile alike. Paul affirms this when addressing the gentile church in Galatia: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law . . . in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14). Paul then refers to Christian believers as "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

The sign act of the new covenant is the Table of the Lord, the participation in the bread and the cup as instituted by Jesus and celebrated at least weekly by the early church. It became the culminating act of worship in response to hearing and receiving the word of God. To experience the Eucharist was to experience the covenantal relationship. As Hughes O. Old rightly points out, "Because Christians have

[11] Hebrew transliteration for "loving-kindness."

shared the Lord's Supper, a covenantal bond has been established and obligates them to Christ alone."[12]

As with the old covenant, the new covenant established the essence of worship—that through Jesus Christ we have obtained access to God and have the joyful privilege of continuous praise: Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (Heb. 13:15). Old affirms, "Covenantal doxology emphasizes that when the assembly of God's people is united in sacred bond, giving thanks for the works of redemption, confessing their covenantal obligations, and witnessing to the faithfulness of God, then God is worshipped."[13]

Christian worship, therefore, is covenantal worship—worship that flows from a formal relationship between God and God's people.

## *Theme Four: Worship Is Corporate in Nature*

While worship is fundamentally built on a relationship between God and God's people, there is another important relational aspect of worship to be considered – that of brothers and sisters within the Christian faith community and the way in which they relate to one another as they worship God together. Evan as the God-to-people and people-to-God nature of covenantal worship reflects relationship, (the so-called vertical direction of worship), so also the people-to-people relationship is a way in which worship is relational (the horizontal direction of worship).

Notice that following the Exodus Event, God formalized his covenant to an entire nation. The covenant he established was not with an individual, but with a people. Moses was the intermediary of the covenant, but the covenant was not with Moses alone; it was with all the descendants of Abraham. After all, it was an entire race that was delivered from Egyptian slavery, a "whole congregation of the Israelites" who journeyed in the wilderness (Exod. 17:1). When God-ordained convocations, festivals, and solemn assemblies were established, it was the responsibility of all God's people to respond. If any were missing, it

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[12] Hughes O. Old, *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology: Some Thoughts on the Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 117.

[13] Old, *Themes and Variations,* 111 (emphasis added).

was noticed, and there was a price to be paid (see Num. 16).

Likewise, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). The first recorded worship event of the church was a corporate encounter with God, one that thousands experienced together. They witnessed the mysterious manifestations of the coming of the Holy Spirit together, heard the word preached together, and responded together, crying out as one voice, "What should we do?" (Acts 2:37). The "chosen race, royal priesthood, and holy nation" of the New Testament was every bit as corporate in its experience of and response to God as the Israelites were under the old covenant.

Christian public worship is always corporate worship. The English word "corporate" is derived from the Latin word corpus, meaning the human body. Thus an experience is corporate if it is a matter of belonging to or being united in one body. The church is just such a body. The metaphor of the human body is one of the predominant images in the New Testament for how members of the church of Jesus Christ properly function. Paul's familiar words spell this out: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. . . . Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many" (1 Cor. 12:12, 14).

Christian worship, especially Western Christian worship, has been subject to radical individualism. We have been indoctrinated to think that we are individual worshipers who happen to form the constituency of a local congregation. We have mistakenly viewed our weekly worship as an opportunity for each person to pray individually to God, to hear the word individually, and to respond individually in a way appropriate for each person. But corporate worship is not what takes place at a given church simply because an aggregate group of individual worshipers show up at the announced time of a service. Rather, corporate worship is what happens when the body of Christ assembles to hear with one heart and speak with one voice the words, praises, prayers, petitions, and thanks fitting to Christian worship. Following Moses' explanation of the law to the people, "All the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do'" (Exod. 24:3). Individualism in worship was one of Paul's concerns with the Corinthian church. He writes, "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. . . . So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come

together to eat, wait for one another" (1 Cor. 11:20-21, 33). Individualistic worship when the community is gathered is just not a part of the Old or New Testament mind-set.

The church, from the New Testament viewpoint, is an "assembly" (from the Greek ekklesia, which is derived from kaleo, "to be called out"). The church as understood by the first generation of believers was not an institution but a gathering—an assembly in which the living presence of Jesus Christ resided. To be together was (and remains) a necessary component for experiencing the presence of Christ: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20). True public worship cannot happen without a biblical understanding of its corporate nature. The covenantal side of worship emphasizes the vertical relationship of worship, the God-to-people dimension; the corporate side of worship emphasizes the horizontal relationship of worship, the people-to-people (with God in the middle) dimension. The truest, most authentic services of worship will build on these dual emphases.

## *Theme Five: Worship is Trinitarian in Nature*

It has often been noted that the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Scriptures. The Trinity, however, is no less real or significant for the term's absence. Christian worship flows from and responds to the actions of one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The relationship of God in three persons is evident from Scripture. God is glorified through the Son and vice versa. "Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself'" (John 13:31-32). Perhaps mutual glorification is no more clearly seen than in this stanza from the New Testament hymn mentioned earlier: "God also highly exalted [Christ Jesus] and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11). The mutuality of service within the Godhead cannot be missed: God exalts Jesus; Jesus is proclaimed Lord; God the Father is glorified.

As Jesus neared the end of his earthly ministry, he explained the Holy Spirit's role in the relationship with the Godhead: "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf" (John 15:26). The Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus, yet comes from the Father; while coming from the Father, the Spirit testifies to Jesus' authenticity. Members of the Trinity consistently point beyond their own person to one another. So the internal dialogue and purposes of the Godhead are at work facilitating worship in ways that are mystical yet glorious.

The beautiful mutuality, so evident in the relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit, is profoundly at play in worship. It is more than something multidimensional or even relational; it is mutual—acts exchanged by two or more for the benefit of the other. "Mutual" is from the Latin word mutuus, which means "borrowed." As worship takes its course, the Godhead freely "borrows" from within itself, as the equal exchange of ministry and service to one another transpires. The idea of "borrowing from itself" is not unlike the musical concept *rubato.* When a musician employs *rubato* in a performance, it is a matter of temporarily disregarding the metronomic strictness of the designated tempo so that freedom of expression can occur. What is "robbed" (*rubato)*, in terms of strictness of time at a given point in the score, is given back with a push forward at other points. Thus the elasticity of the tempo creates spontaneous beauty while the balance of the tempo is ultimately maintained. All three members of the Godhead receive worship and enable worship. As they do so, they are free (because of mutuality) to enable or to receive, to hold back or to push forward (*rubato*), as they minister to each other by fulfilling each one's appropriate function. God is thereby glorified, and God's creation is able to participate more fully in worship as a result (though we are not likely to be aware of this activity of God as it occurs).

James B. Torrance summarizes trinitarian worship well: "The Son [lives] a life of union and communication with the Father in the Spirit . . . . By his Spirit he draws men and women to participate both in his life of worship and communion with the Father and in his mission from the Father to the world."[14] Torrance concludes, "Christian worship is, therefore, our participation through the Spirit in the Son's communion

[14] James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1996), 31.

with the Father, in his vicarious life of worship and intercession."[15]

According to Torrance, Christian worship is trinitarian in three important ways:

- In the action of prayer: we pray to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.
- In the addressing of prayers: there are many biblical and historical examples of prayers offered to each person of the Trinity.
- In glorifying all persons as God: hence the use of trinitarian doxologies, especially at the end of the Psalms.[16]

As the early church father Origen instructs, "We must address praises to God through Christ, who is praised together with him in the Holy Spirit, who is likewise hymned."[17]

Christian worship will always be trinitarian in nature. The question will be to what degree we acknowledge and express the appropriate roles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as we engage in God-centered worship.

## *Theme Six: Worship Is a Transformational Journey*

Earlier in this chapter we discussed the dialogical nature of worship, which is built on the idea of revelation/response. One must be careful, however, not to view worship as a series of unrelated episodes of conversation between God and humans. When we carefully examine the "God encounters" of worshipers in the Bible, we discover a larger dimension to the encounter than we noticed at first glance. There is a bigger picture to be seen. We must step back for the panoramic view in order to see that the occasions of revelation and response formulate something bigger—something that can be compared to a journey.

Luke 24:13-35 tells a marvelous story of just such a journey. Much dialogue took place between Jesus and the disciples traveling the road together from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection. The episodes of conversation are readily seen. For example:

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15 Ibid., 15.

16 Ibid., 36.

17 Paul T. Coke, *Mountain and Wilderness: Prayer and Worship in the Biblical World and Early Church* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1978), 114.

- Jesus engaged the disciples by inquiring as to what they were discussing.
- They responded incredulously and rehearsed the recent events concerning Jesus of Nazareth.
- Jesus explained the Scriptures to them.
- They invited Jesus to lodging and fellowship.
- Jesus broke bread.
- They recognized him in the action.
- They eagerly darted off to tell others that Jesus was alive.

Yet when you look at the entire story, you see that Jesus succeeded in weaving the dialogue into something much more significant than mere conversation. There was a transformation in the disciples that took place over time as a result of the whole conversation. Their encounter with Jesus was not a journey because they were traveling the same road together. Rather, their encounter was a journey because they progressed spiritually—from their place of origin (grief and confusion), through necessary terrain (explanation of the Scriptures), and finally, to their destination (recognizing the risen Lord).[18]

The ancient Israelites were well acquainted with the journey of worship. The holy temple, located in Jerusalem, was the central location of Israelite worship. Three times a year, all adult males were expected to appear in Jerusalem in order to keep the primary feasts: the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths. (If the worshiper lived a great distance from Jerusalem, he made a yearly pilgrimage.) These pilgrimages were holy journeys. Large companies of family members and friends made the trip together (see Luke 2:41-45). They traveled from their homes, through the difficult terrain, to their destination—all for the purpose of fulfilling their worship obligations. As Jerusalem came into view and the pilgrims entered the city gates, it was cause for great rejoicing and celebration (Pss. 87:1-2; 100:4; 118:19).

At the temple mount, a "journey within a journey" occurred as the priests performed the prescribed acts of worship in a progression from the public forum to the holy of holies. Three areas were designated for cultic action. In the outer courts of the temple, morning and evening sacrifices were offered. The priests and the Levites attended to their duties while the male populace came and went freely. The inner court contained the

[18] More is said about the journey motif and this passage of Scripture in chapter 3 of *The Worship Architect*, "Four Rooms for Encountering God."

golden lamp stand, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense. Only the priests could enter this area. They did so daily to keep the lamps and incense lit and to supply fresh bread for the table. Finally, the holy of holies was the most sacred space, the inner sanctum and repository for the Ark of the Covenant. Only the high priest was allowed behind the veil, and only once per year, on the Day of Atonement.

Jewish believers would not have viewed their worship as taking place in increments; rather they would view the whole pilgrimage as holistic in nature. The entire journey was a holy experience of travel. Community, sacrifice, and return. It was all part of the worship ritual. As contemporary worshipers in a sound-bite world where interactions can be brief and attention spans short, we do well to remind ourselves that Christian worship is a sustained encounter with God—a journey from our place of origin (physically and spiritually) through meaningful acts of worship as a community, to transformation from having been in God's presence. The journey is the point.

## *Conclusion*

What does it mean to have biblical worship? Do we mean that the Bible clearly lays out all the mandates for worship in the twenty-first century? Do we mean that the Bible specifies an order of worship that we should follow or gives us a prescribed text for liturgy? Do the Scriptures say exactly how every Christian group should worship in every place and time? No, the Bible does not offer us all the details, so we cannot assert that biblical worship is any of these things. We can, however, say that biblical worship is the effort to be faithful to our best understanding of the ways that God has related to his covenant people throughout the Old and New Testaments, and to apply these patterns in appropriate ways in our context today.

In this chapter we have examined six foundational themes of worship found in Scripture. Let me now state these in the form of biblical principles to represent what worship will be and do if it is to be faithful to Scripture:

- Worship is centered in God's acts of salvation.
- Worship follows the pattern of revelation and response.
- Worship enacts a covenantal relationship.
- Worship is corporate in nature.

- Worship is trinitarian in its essence.
- Worship is a journey of transformation.

We are now ready to establish an operating definition of Christian worship to be used throughout the remainder of our study. I know of no better one than this:

Worship is the expression of a relationship in which God the Father reveals himself and his love in Christ, and by his Holy Spirit administers grace, to which we respond in faith, gratitude, and obedience.[19]

**Recommended Resources**

Constance M. Cherry. *Worship Like Jesus: A Guide for Every Follower*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019.

John Jefferson Davis. *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.

Simon Chan. *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

James B. Torrance. *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

[19] Robert Schaper, *In His Presence: Appreciating Your Worship Tradition (*Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 15-16.

**Andrei Rublev**
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# Faithful. Trinitarian. Worship.

## *Some Thoughts on the Trinity and Weaving a Seamless Tapestry of Trinitarian Worship Practices*

Daniel Chinn*

Essayist Wendell Berry, writing about the importance of remembering important things, says that words come to him "out of their deep caves, needing to be remembered."[1] I'm not sure the words of this essay have come to me out of their deep caves, but surely they are about things that are both important and need remembering. Augustine, fourth-century thinker and lover of God that he was, reminds us of our need for humility when trying to understand the nature of the one God in three Persons. He sagely observed that, "in no other subject [i.e., the Trinity] is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable."[2]

My purpose here is to help us think together about the Trinity and

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1 Wendell Berry, *This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2013), VII, p. 154.

2 Augustine, *The Trinity*, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 19.

how a Christian understanding of the Trinity might[3] shape and inform our Christian worship practices thus enabling us to weave a richly hued tapestry of faithful, thoughtful, trinitarian worship in reverence of our triune God. The value of the rich theological tapestry we see with the triune God is richer hues of truth, goodness, and beauty which in turn strengthens the strands of our relationship with Him and one another. The colorful threads of these vertical and horizontal relationships then become the tapestry of deeply satisfying worship as we gather to gaze upon the beauty of our Lord (Ps 27:4).

## *Coherent Worship*

Most of us want to live what Steve Garber calls a "seamless life."[4] Always and everywhere we long for consistency between belief and behavior, learning and living, orthodoxy and orthopraxy, theology and doxology. Words from deep caves aside, we want what we believe about the Trinity to matter and therefore be integral to our Christian worship, offered as a seamless tapestry of trinitarian practices.

To do so, we must address a dangerous idea that tears at the seam of the Christian church and leaves its theology, and therefore its Christian worship, rather raggedy. It's called dualism. Dualism is the idea that life is not seamless but divided into the realms of the secular and the sacred. The things we call normal, everyday life (work, sex, recreation, family, relationships, eating, sleeping, shopping, etc.) are secular, and all the special or spiritual things we do for/with God (Bible reading, prayer, going to church, etc.) are sacred. The result is that the Saturday baseball game has nothing to do with Sunday morning worship at church.

In God's economy of grace to us, though, there is no such division. If Wendell Berry is right—there are no sacred places and secular places; there are either sacred places or desecrated places. Thus, every relationship, location, and circumstance matters to God. From God's perspective (and ours too if we're thinking rightly) all of life is sacred.

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[3] Addressing the issue of the Regulative Principle of worship is beyond the bailiwick of this article. Therefore, I will use words such as 'might' or 'perhaps' or 'could' throughout this article to account for different approaches to Christian worship practices. I also acknowledge the categories of 'incidental' and 'preference' when it comes to the issue of Christian worship. I do believe that a trinitarian understanding of God should *inform* our worship practices, but I also believe there is much latitude in how that understanding ends up *shaping* those practices.

[4] Steve Garber, *The Seamless Life* (Downers Grove, IL,: Intervarsity Press, 2020), 2.

All of life is worship. Even baseball. Everything that we find on the horizontal *and* on the vertical is an aspect of God's relationship with us in the lives that are ours to live. This understanding should create a greater consistency between our belief in the triune God and how we worship Him corporately because all of life is worship to the glory of our triune God.

At this point, we need to state clearly the difference between "worship" in the general sense and "Christian worship" or "corporate worship." Here, "Christian worship" means when Christians gather formally for corporate, public worship services in various places and spaces. Yes, all of life is worship, but Christians, we believe, are called by God to gather regularly in a corporate, public setting for the purpose of worshipping the triune God as the assembled, covenant people of God (Heb 10:24-25). And we want that specific kind of worship to be humble and coherent too, perhaps especially so. As physical/material beings, we necessarily worship (both in a general sense and in a corporate sense) from the horizontal plane. Our ordinary, yet very complex, earth-bound lives are the only context for our Christian worship offered to God on the vertical. It cannot be otherwise. Yet, it seems we've accepted some ideas that we should not and forgotten to remember others that we should. Our tapestry of worship, therefore, is shabbier than perhaps we'd like to admit.

## *Revealed Trinitarian Knowledge*

The triune God and our proper worship of Him is *revealed* knowledge. Yes, we know from Romans 1 that creation, by God's design and intent, reveals that He exists, something of His glory and power, and that He alone is worth creation's love, obedience, and worship. We learn this from creation, if we are open to it. I'm writing these words outside hearing the buzz of our bees, listening to birdsong, smelling the nearby red roses, listening to my chickens as they lay eggs, and a small, brown, intricately beautiful butterfly has just landed on my shirt, staying awhile displaying God's beauty in the simplest of ways. Surely God has revealed Himself in his creation! And yet, there is a great deal about the triunity of God and right worship of Him that is not revealed in or through creation, gift of grace that it is.

To complement the revelation found in creation, the one true God does what no other god can do. He speaks. Yes, He spoke, and

all creation came into existence (Gen 1:3; Heb 1:1-2). Yet, that same God continued to speak progressively through the Holy Spirit, moving men throughout redemptive history (1 Pet 1:10) to record His inspired speech (1 Tim 3:15), the Old and New Testaments. And of course, His clearest and most profound and gracious "speech," or revelation, is in the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, the living Word who came down the ladder (1 John 1:2), revealing the Father to us through His Spirit (John 6:43). Thus, in wonderfully progressive ways our understanding of the Trinity developed and deepened as God revealed Himself in the three Persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as our sole focus of worship and glory and love. The triune God of glory and grace continues to "speak" and reveal Himself to us in and through Scripture (John 16:13).

## *The Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)*

The simplest statement of the Trinity is that there is one God in three persons. God is one. We know this from the *Shema* (Deut 6:4), "The Lord our God is one." Christians in all the ages believe that there is only one, true, eternal, God who alone is worthy (1 Sam 2:2) of our singular and glad-hearted devotion (1 Pet 1:8). We do not worship three gods by acknowledging the triunity of this one God. We worship the one God who eternally exists as the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:20, 2 Cor 13:14). The Father is God (Isa 57:15-16), the Son is God (John 8:58), the Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:9; 2 Cor 3:17). All eternal, co-equal, of the same essence. The three persons in one God (Mat 28:20)

The phrases, "immanent" Trinity and the "economic" Trinity, sound scary (words from deep caves, perhaps), but this terminology was once common in Christianity and useful for our purposes here.[5] Granted, immanent Trinity sounds like a five-dollar word in a five-cent essay, but it's simply a way to understanding the nature of the persons of the Trinity in and of themselves. That is to say, the relationships eternally enjoyed by the three persons of the Godhead (the Trinity). For all eternity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have possessed and enjoyed complete, infinitely deep, personal relationships with each other (e.g., John 17:5). They have known and delighted in healthy community. They have given and received

[5] See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 302.

love from one another. Their relationships are perfectly harmonious, unified, complete, unselfish, and other-oriented. All three possess and share mutually with one another all that is true, good, beautiful, lovely, just, right, pure, holy, honorable, delightful, wise, and wholesome. Their community is healthy because they eternally experience the three aspects of healthy community: mutuality, responsibility, and affection (1 Cor 13). All this together makes for one eternal, delightful, glory-giving conversation between the three persons. They belong to one another, respond to each other, and love one another—infinitely so.

The Father is the Father because He is the father of the Son and the fountain head of all. He is the first person of the Trinity. The second person of the Trinity is the Son. He is called Son because, well, he is God the Father's eternally begotten Son (John 3:16). Not that the Son began to exist at some point, but that He alone is the unique, eternal Son—a role or position given to Him from His Father (Matt 3:17). The reason the second person is called the Son is because that's the position He receives from His Father. He does not receive deity or divinity or Godhood, because the Son is eternally and fully God, though in His role/position/proprieties He is the Son, the second person of the Trinity. The third person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit. He is not called the Son, because that is not His position and God the Father has only one, unique, eternal Son. The Spirit's role/position/proprieties are different from those of the Father or the Son; though He is eternally and fully God, of the same substance and essence as the Father and the Son (2 Cor 3:17).

The economic Trinity (having nothing to do with the stock market) is the same Trinity as the immanent Trinity, just a different way to understand the Trinity. Whereas the immanent Trinity is how we understand how the members of the Trinity interact and love and enjoy each other, the economic Trinity is how we understand how the three members of the Trinity interact with us, love us, and enjoy us as their creation and objects of their redemptive work of grace on our behalf—for their own glory and worship. It is through understanding the economic Trinity that we understand the immanent Trinity, since the relationships of the immanent Trinity are revealed to us in their "economy" of creation and redemption of grace. (John 14:1-16:33)

In the economic Trinity, the three members of the Trinity have particular roles or positions from which they accomplish their work of creation and redemption. The role of the Father in creation and

redemption is that of initiator. He initiates creating as a joyful overflow of His love for his Son, initiating creation for His Son (Col 1:16). In this role, the Father originates the idea of creation, though as God, all three members are active in creation. In His role as the Son, He is the Word the Father uses to bring creation into existence (John 1:3). The Son, in his role, is the creative agent the Father uses to create all things out of nothing (Heb 1:2-4). And finally, when it comes to creation, the Holy Spirit possesses yet a different role/position than either the Father or the Son. His role is that of giving life, bringing order, and sustaining all that the Father creates through the Son (Gen 1:2, Psalm 104:30, 2 Cor 3:17).

In redemption of their rebellious, yet wonderfully loved creatures, the Father, again, has the role of Initiator. Redeeming His covenant people *is* the Father's plan. He sends the Son, God incarnate, to accomplish the salvation planned by the Father—to be the faithful Son of truth, goodness, and beauty that Adam was expected to be, but made a slobbering mess of it. The Son, consistently humbling Himself, is sent into the world by the Father (John 17:1) as the Word, whereby all those who believe in the Son shall be saved and enter into a lifetime of learning to live a life of grace with all three members of the Trinity (1 John 5:6-12). The Holy Spirit's role is to apply the rescuing work of the Son to the hearts and minds of the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve that we may turn to the Son for rescue. The Holy Spirit's role is to glorify the Father and the Son (John 16:12-15) by working sanctification (heart and mind transformation), living in us as He does (1 Cor 6:19), restoring God's image of truth, goodness, and beauty (Gal 5:22). In that restorative process, God looks again at His creation, seeing Himself more and more reflected in us, as in a mirror, and joyfully declares as He once did over His creation, "this is very good!" (Gen 1:31).

## *A Seamless Fabric of Trinitarian Christian Worship*

It's tempting to say that the connections between our understanding of the three members of the Trinity (proximate as it is) and Christian worship are obvious. But I don't think that's necessarily true in most quarters of North American Christian worship. Cast your mind back. When was the last time you heard a message or series of messages

preached from the pulpit on the Trinity? The last time the songs used in corporate worship were thoughtfully trinitarian? The last time the prayers you heard were shaped by trinitarian considerations? The last time the overall liturgy (order of the service) was structured to account for all three Persons of the Godhead? The last time confession of faith and confession of sins (if these are part of your corporate worship) were couched in trinitarian terms? The last time you heard the overall theology of your local church structured around the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

Part of what accounts for this hard reality for many of us is that somewhere along the way the Christian church began to think of the Trinity as merely incidental to the Christian faith. We forgot to remember some very important things. And, too often, hard things get left out. I firmly believe, though, that the Trinity is not merely the add-on it has become. The Trinity may be the essential belief from deep caves; the very *essence* of our faith and therefore, our corporate worship. It cannot be otherwise. Hard or not, deep or not, without a trinitarian framework, our Christian worship is likely to be anemic and man-centered at best and idolatrous and self-focused at worst.

To avoid such a tragic reality in our worship practices, let me offer some thoughts on how our robust Christian worship could be shaped by our essential trinitarian theology. What follows are merely some observations for your consideration. It is an attempt at weaving a seamless (yet proximate) tapestry of trinitarian Christian worship that seeks to honor and reverence God, the High and exalted God that He is in three Persons and to build one another up in the most holy faith (Jude 6), created worshippers that we are.

## *Seamlessly Ordering Our Motivations*

Writing as she does about beholding God's glory in everyday life, Ruth Simmons insists that, "Worship follows mercy." She draws that thought from Romans 12:1 by rightly connecting the first and last part of the verse—a connection often missed. "Therefore, I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." In her own way, Simmons want us to remember, "It's the gracious mercy of God that rescued us from a life of self-worship to a

life of true worship."[6] Sinful, broken creatures that we are makes this arrangement necessary. How could it be otherwise? It's God's mercy that first opens the vista to a restored relationship with Him and the proper response to His mercy, says Paul, is faithful worship—"in view of God's mercy . . . this is your true and proper worship." Mercy from God brings us to the proper motivation in our corporate worship: to reverence our glorious, gracious, and triune God. God the Father shows mercy through Christ, by the Spirit for the sake of His own worship.

Gathering as we do as God's covenant people for corporate worship, the primary motivation for such worship is *God's own glory*. Our triune God desires such (John 8:49-50) and has, in fact, assembled a people for the express purpose of worshiping Him rightly (Exod 4, 2 Sam 2:2) Is this not the reason God has graciously revealed Himself as the one, true, eternal, triune, and merciful God? That we might assemble to give Him the adoration He deserves (Psalm 100)? To acknowledge His worth, infinite weight of glory, and love as we direct our corporate praise to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit? Our spiritual benefit is not the primary motivation for corporate worship. Acknowledging the Father's majesty, through the Son's mediation, by the Spirit's enabling presence is what motivates and animates our Christian worship (Rom. 8:26). Deep in the cave, we really need to ask and answer these questions regarding our Christian worship, "Why?" "What is our motive?" "What is our purpose for gathering as we do in our places and spaces of worship?" "Why does God command us to gather?" Deserved worship always follows undeserved mercy, and mercy helps us rightly order our motivation for worship—honoring our God in all His triune splendor (Psalm 99).

## *Seamlessly Ordering Our Loves.*

Augustine first emphasized the importance of remembering what we love, and then later Jonathan Edwards helped us think deeper about ordering our loves. Their point was that if you really want to know a man, do not ask him what he knows. Ask him what he loves. And isn't that really what "getting our priorities right" is all about—ordering our loves? The revelation and work of the Trinity is all about reordering our hearts, prioritizing our loves. We need to remember their greatest

[6] Ruth Simmons, *Beholding and Becoming: The Art of Everyday Worship* (Eugene, OR,: Harvest House Publishers, 2019), 184.

command graciously given to us: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength" (Matt 22:27).

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit so intensely love their own glory and one another that the Son was sent to die on the cross (Col 1:20-21). Did you catch that? I did not say He was sent and died because He loves *us* so much. This raises an aspect of the crucifixion event that is seldom heard in Christian worship. The three members of the Trinity so love their own glory and love one another that they were willing to suffer a division in their relationships, the likes of which had never been known among them. Thinking about what transpired on the cross that Christ endured, Paul Tripp puts it like this. "Unthinkable, irrational, impossible to conceive! The Trinity torn asunder. The Son wrenched from his Father. Salvation realized. . . . But in the process, the three in one was torn in two, the Father did the most painful thing that has ever been done. He turned his back on you."[7] Christ was willing to experience separation from His Father (Matt. 27:46) because of His love for the glory of His Father (John 17:2), not primarily for us. Jesus does love us, yes, the Bible tells us so. But He loves His Father foremost and enables us by His Spirit to love the Father foremost as well in our Christian worship (Matt. 22:27).

## *Seamlessly Ordering the Gospel*

You may think this is a subset of the previous point, but there is a difference. The gospel is the good news about God's glorious image restored to His creation. To accomplish this, the Father sent His Son, who is the express image of God's truth, goodness, and beauty (Col. 1:15) to restore the Father's image back to earth. The Son's life, death, and resurrection was so that He could send His Spirit to indwell us so that we too could reflect God's image in our ordinary lives and our corporate worship. What we're thinking about here is the preaching in Christian worship. Preaching from the pulpit on Sunday mornings must necessarily be trinitarian in order to get the gospel right. What I mean is appropriately preaching the texts on the Trinity and arcing all our preaching from a trinitarian framework while allowing Scripture to direct us to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit.

Again, many Christians gather on Sunday morning sure that the

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[7] Paul David Tripp, *My Heart Cries Out: Gospel Meditations for Everyday Life* (Wheaton, IL,: Crossway, 2019), 36.

gospel is about them. How God so loved them that He sent Jesus to die for their sins and will someday come and rescue them from what seems to be this God-forsaken place. The gospel, though, is not first and foremost about us. Yes, God mercifully draws us into the gospel's narrative, but that narrative primarily flows out of a regard for His own glorious image. The gospel is about the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit restoring their creation to reflect again God's image of truth, goodness, and beauty in the street-level lives that are ours to live (2 Tim 1:8-13). And isn't that the very point of God graciously assembling His people to worship Him? He designs corporate worship to remind us that the gospel is first about what God has done and is doing for His own glory, and then second, for our good as we live in relationship with that wondrously magnificent God. Our worship will be faithful to the degree that we get the gospel right, and we will get the gospel right to the degree we get the Trinity right.

## *Seamlessly Ordering Our Songs*

Toe-tapping aside, it seems to me that an understanding of the Trinity should inform to some degree the selection of songs with which we worship our triune God. Choosing songs that worship the Father, magnify the Son, and admire the Spirit, helps us worship God as He has revealed Himself. Necessarily keeping our triune God in the forefront of our worship helps us maintain our proper place—bowing before our great God, singing His worth and power and glory and love.

God's purpose in having us use songs in worship is to help us get our theology right—see nearly any Psalm or most of the songs in the book of Revelation. It's a mystery to me why we would choose songs that present either poor or bad theology.

Pastors and worship leaders together, therefore, need to ask hard questions of any song being considered for Sunday morning worship. Is the song trinitarian? I do not mean that every song must explicitly mention the three persons. What I do mean is this: Does the song at least reflect a trinitarian awareness, or flow from a trinitarian framework? Does the song teach only good theology? Does the song square with Scripture? Does the song place Christ at center stage and not us? Could a Muslim or Mormon sing this song with equal conviction as us? Are all musical formats equally valid as long as the text is appropri-

ately trinitarian?[8] Such questions and others can go a long way toward developing seamless trinitarian worship practices. A faithful fabric of Christian worship must have songs faithful to the Christian faith.

## *Seamlessly Ordering Our Prayers*

Liturgical or written prayers can help keep our prayers trinitarian. Our prayers primarily should be addressed to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit, since that's the pattern Jesus gave us when teaching His disciples and us to pray (Matt 6:9-13). Not that praying to Jesus or the Spirit is wrong, but the Father holds the priority when we pray. Corporate prayers addressed to the Father, through Christ and His mediatorial work on our behalf, by the indwelling presence and aid of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:14) can be found in the Common Book of Prayer, in many of our confessions of faith, some of our very fine hymns, or in many of the writings of the Early Church Fathers. Extemporaneous prayers (prayers spoken on the spot) can be trinitarian as well, but it does take some forethought—and I might add practice—to pray "from the heart" and make those prayers trinitarian in form and content.

Prayer in our corporate gatherings remind us that we are dependent creatures. Prayer reminds us that, left to ourselves, we are self-centered and self-righteous. Part of God's design for prayer is to remind us that we are dependent creatures, created for a dependent relationship with God the Father. Prayer reminds us that we have access to the Father only through the Son (John 6:37) and we now have access to the Son through the Holy Spirit. Rightly ordered prayers, designed as they are by our God to help deliver us from our self-centeredness and our self-righteousness, ought to be offered to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. For prayer to be prayer, all three members of the Trinity ought to be included. How can it be otherwise?

## *Seamlessly Ordering Our Confessions and Creeds*

Finally, perhaps the most useful thing about including confessions (from all denominational flavors) and creeds (Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian, etc.) as part of our Christian worship practices is that they bring to us words from deep caves, needing to be remembered. Using confes-

[8] I credit Dr. Luke Carlson for the conversation and thoughts behind this question.

sions and creeds is not merely a denominational issue or preference. In the early church, implementing the confessions and creeds was merely Christian. The liturgy, or order of service, always included some use of confessions and creeds. Often the entire service was ordered around the trinitarian sections of the creeds. Beginning with the section regarding the Father, moving to the Son, and ending with the Holy Spirit. They knew something we need to remember—confessing the triunity of God keeps our Christian worship, well, Christian. Perhaps thinking of your own local church, you're asking how you can help make your Christian worship more trinitarian. I hardily commend using the confessions and creeds of the church in your church services. This practice will help make your corporate worship necessarily more trinitarian, and therefore more God-honoring and more edifying and beneficial to the assembled people.

At minimum, we could adopt the practice of ending our corporate worship by singing in unison the Doxology. Teach every member that song. Give them copies of it to take home. Print it in the bulletin. Post it on Instagram. Make it available in every way possible so God's people know it like the back of their hand. And then sing it! Sing it at the beginning of the worship service, perhaps, but surely sing it at the end, so the people leave corporate worship with the Trinity on their minds and in their hearts. Leaving with the triune God of glory and grace on their minds and in their hearts matters because our vertical worship will also inform the horizontal worship of our street-level lives in all their beautiful complexity.

> *Praise God from Whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below. Praise Him above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*

Words from deep caves that need remembering—humbly and consistently—if we are to weave a richly hued tapestry of faithful Christian worship that rightly honors and venerates our one God in the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with our beautiful, thoughtful, trinitarian worship practices. These practices ought to give grace that enlightens the way we love God, play baseball on Monday night, watch Netflix, grow our gardens, drive our cars, love our families, savor our food, approach our work, use our iPhones, react on Facebook, and think about political, cultural, and moral issues in the lives that are ours to live for the glory of our triune God.

**Recommended Resources**

Bryan Chapell. *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.

Michael Reeves. *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012.

Reggie M. Kidd. *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005

John Frame. *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practices of Biblical Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996.

**Tim Lowly**

*Shift*

acrylic on panel

2002

Image courtesy of the artist

The artist Tim Lowly's main subject over the course of his career has been his daughter, Temma, who suffered complications shortly after her birth and developed cerebral palsy with spastic quadriplegia. In his work Lowly captures the unique beauty and personhood of Temma, and in his tender but honest portraits of her one can find echoes of wonder and meaning.

— Richard W. Cummings

# Ways We Worship: Disability and Worship

Benjamin T. Conner*

If you were planning to spend time with my friend Xavier, you had better be prepared to move. He is a joyful bundle of energy who is in constant motion and is fascinated to the point of obsession by things you might not even notice. You will take up four lanes if you go bowling with him, and you will always have to direct him back to the lane when it is his turn to bowl—especially if there are vending machines nearby. If you go to Chick-Fil-A with him, you will need to make sure he is only eating his own food and not that of those around him—he is not afraid to make new friends, especially if they have extra chicken nuggets. If you go to a water park with him, you will want to bring along a couple of other friends to make sure you don't lose him on the Lazy River. But, if you do lose track of Xavier in one of those places for a bit, or if he does something deemed socially inappropriate because he has difficulty understanding the rules according to which everyone else seems to be living, I have found that people are understanding and engage him in playful and gentle interaction. In my time with him in public, I have never experienced anyone shush him, move away from him because he is distracting, or look at me as if I am a failure as a friend because Xavier "acted out."

Xavier is on the autism spectrum. He seems to be living in a different world than me sometimes. But whatever that world is, it seems to be a world filled with joy. Xavier expresses his joy with powerful leaps and

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bounds and engages with things, animals, and people through a whirlwind of motion. While at times he may seem distant or uninterested in what you are saying in the moment, just remember, Xavier is more connected to presence and physicality than he is to concepts or ideas.

I wonder, how he would be received at what is for many people the most social-skill intensive setting they attend all week—church. How would Xavier be received at the worship service at your church? Are there things that Xavier and others with disabilities could teach us about the church at worship?

When thinking about disability and worship, many churches are stuck in an accessibility paradigm. They ask important questions about doorway width, automatic doors, hallway width, hearing loop technology and whether or not to offer translation services for Deaf persons, where to locate a pew cut out, whether or not to have a quiet room, and how to distribute large print bulletins or hymnals. These are all important questions to ask that are oriented toward making sure people with disabilities feel welcomed and can participate in a worship service.

In this brief article I'm going to suggest a different paradigm: the paradigm of enrichment. The inclusion paradigm is helpful for making sure people with disabilities can be present and engaged in the worship service. The enrichment paradigm suggests that people with disabilities, because of their particular embodiment, perspective, and way of being in the world, have something indispensable to offer their congregations; people with disabilities can lead congregations into fresh and life-giving practices of worship.

## *What Is Disability?*

The ways in which we speak to, about, or for people with disabilities betrays our model or theology of disability. If one suggests "Tom has a disability," they are likely unwittingly espousing a medical model of disability in which the "disability" is some sort of impairment or challenge that Tom faces. The fact that Tom has this disabling condition makes it difficult for Tom to engage in the worship life of the church, so Tom must overcome the disability by means of medicine, therapy, or supports. But is the disability Tom's or the church's? Is it that Tom is "disabled," or that the church is *disabling*? In other words, is the worship life of the church organized around a normal, typical body (what-

ever that is) such that it is very difficult for Tom, or for anyone with a disability, to participate? In that case, we could say that Tom is, in fact, disabled by the church. Is the "problem" Tom's, is the "problem" the church's, or is it a combination of the two? If our life together were structured differently, would Tom's disability even be disabling?

In truth, the concept of disability is difficult to define, but one thing is certain: disability is an unsurprising aspect of being human. It is not a deficiency or the consequence of sin, and people with disabilities are to be neither pitied nor valorized because of their disability. Disability, while representing real challenges and impairments, is also a fluid category, a label, a social construction that helps people make sense of the world. Nearly twenty percent of U. S. citizens claim some level of disability, and nearly everyone is touched by disability at some point in their lives, either through a family member who is or becomes disabled, or personally through an accident, illness, or the natural process of aging. Disability does not impact whether or not one can be a disciple, have a vocation, or participate in worship, though a disability might shape the way in which that person follows Christ, bears witness to the kingdom, or worships.

Tom has cerebral palsy, he moves constantly, uses a power wheelchair with a joystick to travel around, and communicates through an augmented speech device. I write this article during the COVID-19 pandemic, when churches are trying to figure out how to worship together while we are honoring physical/social distancing protocols. It is a time when worship is being reimagined. It is also a time when the church can learn a lot from people with disabilities, many of whose lives have always had to navigate such social waters due to mobility challenges. Disabled people are "expert life hackers" in the language of disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson, in that they are constantly trying to figure out how to traverse a world that is not designed for them. Tom has been guiding me in worship during the pandemic by leading a weekly Bible study. The study is usually under ten participants but includes several other people who use assisted speech. Tom is an excellent leader. Without the pandemic and the necessity of gathering in online forums, I wonder if Tom would have had such an opportunity to lead. Allow me to share some things I have learned about worship from my time in Tom's Bible study and from other disabled friends.

## *Dis-able Our Worship Life*

I'd like to think that there are very few people in the U. S. who discriminate against people because of a perceived disability, but my conversations with disabled friends tells me otherwise. However, the more common form of discrimination that people with disabilities face in the church is a kind of ableism. Ableism is a lifting up of the ideal, typically functioning body and mind as normal such that our life together is oriented by the typically functioning body in a way that marginalizes disabled people. Being led in worship by Tom has helped me to recognize some of my own ableist tendencies: my belief that life has a particular speed; that people are meant to be independent; that speaking without a device is better than speaking with the aid of a device; that people who process more slowly aren't as smart or their perspectives are not as valuable as those of quick processors; that a pastor can project his/her voice; that a pastor can walk; or, that a pastor can independently make house calls. Being with Tom has challenged me to dis-able my worship life, meaning, Tom's presence and leadership has developed in me a growing awareness of *bodies*, *spaces*, and *time* and has challenged me to reimagine worship practices through the lens of the human experience of disability.

## *A Growing Awareness*

### Awareness of Bodies

How do the bodies that are in a space impact the way things are done? If the answer is "they don't," then there is a problem. James K. A. Smith has reminded us that, being human, we are not each a brain on a stick.[1] We are embodied creatures who respond to God with all of what we are and not merely our minds. Theology is embodied and enacted. While I am very aware of Tom's embodiment and the different ways that he interacts with the world, I have become equally aware of my own embodiment. Worship is filled with sitting, standing, passing peace through shaking hands, vocalizing, often eating and drinking, motions of blessing, and postures of prayer. We are called to "taste and see" that the Lord is good. Tom does every one of these actions in a way that is

[1] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

different from the way I do them. He is unable to stand, he has difficulty initiating a handshake, he vocalizes through a speech device, and if he is to eat or drink he will require someone to put the bread and wine into his mouth. Some people think about disability rights in the church as making a level playing field. As my friend Randy has quipped, "If it's a level playing field, I die!" Like Randy, Tom needs supports to be present, contribute to the life of a community, and flourish. When Tom's body is present in a worship service, he changes the way the people around him interact and his presence reminds the church that worship is a communal experience and not an individualistic one. Attending to Tom and supporting him is a way of honoring God. The most important embodiment is the body of Christ, which is made up of many parts, all of which are essential for healthy functioning.

### Awareness of Space

I was interviewing Janet, a blind woman, about her experience of the church. We were conducting the interview on the fifth floor of the theological library at my seminary. I had never noticed before how challenging it was to navigate hallways, elevators, or book stacks. When you spend time with people with disabilities, you become very aware of how spaces are organized and, more importantly, what the spaces say about who fits or belongs in those spaces. I was speaking at a church recently where the lecturn/podium was on a platform that was three risers high. There was no ramp or lift for accessibility. While this fact is no big deal to me, depending on how my knees feel on any given day (remember, disability is a fluid category), the inaccessible platform communicated to me that this church had no expectation of a preacher who is a wheelchair user. The shape of our life together shapes our expectations of one another.

### Awareness of Time

Efficiency is a western cultural value and not a Christian virtue. Tom is not efficient in his communication or in his movement. In the Bible study he leads, when a question is asked, there is no anxiety about the time it takes for Tom to formulate a response. Tom must process the question that is asked of him or the Scripture text, think through a response, type his response on his augmented speech device using only the big toe on his left foot, and then play his response. The space created by that inefficient process holds interpersonal connection,

insight, appreciation, and anticipation. We notice things about the text and about each other that we might otherwise quickly pass over. In what ways does Tom's movement critique our notions of time that can be bought, passed, saved, and spent? Can Tom help his congregation to remember that time is a creation of God that is to be received as a gift? How might our corporate worship be transformed if we have less efficient worship services?

## *Practicing Worship Together*

The concept of Christian practices provides a way of naming and describing the concrete ways in which people and communities (bodies) inhabit space and time and participate in God's ongoing mission by worshiping God with their lives. Practices are ways we participate in God's life and are the means by which individuals and communities are shaped and formed for such participation. Christian practices include ecclesial/church practices like baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as other everyday practices like discernment, sabbath, testimony, friendship, honoring the body, healing and care, or hospitality. Practices are engaged both corporately and individually, received from others or our tradition, shaped by histories and narratives, and catered to present circumstances for our sake and for the sake of the world God so loves. This means that while Christian practices are universally recognizable, they are expressed in unique communities, each inhabiting a particular cultural context. Through these complex social activities Christians have access to the goods—or graces—that can only be experienced through participating in Christ. It is through Christian practices that we offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is our spiritual act of worship (Rom 12:1-2). Profoundly, one is not required to possess certain physical attributes or intellectual capacities in order to participate in Christian practices; one need only be a part of the body of Christ.

## *Baptism and the Lord's Supper*

Two ecclesial or church practices that make up the centerpiece of many worship services are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both practices speak to our fundamental belonging in Christ and to one another in Christ. We are baptized into one body, one Lord, one Christ and we all

partake of the same body at the table in communion. At the same time, these central practices have also been gatekeeping practices that have, at times, communicated to people with disabilities and their families that they don't really belong. Particularly with the Lord's Supper, confirmation, or baptism by profession of faith it is argued that people with intellectual or developmental disabilities shouldn't participate because they don't understand the rite. But, consider what happens when someone is baptized. Baptism is more about the prior and ongoing redemptive activity of God in the world than it is about our affirmation of that work. Since God accommodates all of us through self-revelation and the call to follow as disciples, we should not be surprised that God also accommodates people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and gives them a vocation or calling as disciples. By attending closely to the actions, hopes, dreams, and gifts of our friends with intellectual and developmental disabilities, we may learn more about the variety of ways that God calls, equips, and sends people to share in God's work of redemption. The waters of baptism remind us of God's redeeming work in the world and calls us—*all* of us—to our participation in that redeeming work. Whatever our capacity or giftedness, we are each called to foster one another's growth in faith and service. This, too, is baptism's pointed summons.

For many in the disability community, the Lord's Supper is the ultimate affirmation of their identity in Christ and union with others. Our Lord is the Lord with a broken body, who was despised, whipped, and pierced. In short, Jesus is envisioned as the disabled God. Even in post-resurrection form, Jesus retained the marks of his crucifixion—scars in his hands and his side. Something about his disablement continued into post-resurrection form and these marks are not stigmatized. When we share the Lord's Supper together, we are all connected to the disabled God and in this way we are all connected to each other. This could be said just as, if not more, profoundly of baptism. We are *identified with* the disabled Son of God and *in this way* we ourselves become children of God. Utterly regardless of our countenance or stature, utterly regardless of our capacity of strength physically or intellectually, utterly regardless of our ethnicity or our socio-economic standing, utterly regardless of whether we've been in jail or never once missed a day of school, no one of us identified with Christ is any more or less a bona fide child of God than any other. It's not an identity earned or accomplished. It is a gift

of belonging utterly graciously given.[2] Being in Christ or being whole does not necessarily mean the absence of marks or what we consider disability. The point is that in Christ, disabilities simply don't get in the way of our union with Christ, with others, or our calling to serve him.

## *Proclamation*

There will always be a place for the verbal proclamation of the gospel in a worship service. However, if our congregations are representative of our society, there will likely be a number of people present for whom words are not their primary mode of communication. One of the most powerful proclamations I have seen was an enactment of the binding of Isaac (Gen 22). One of the actors was a young woman with Down syndrome who had been studying Hebrew at a local seminary. Her role in the enactment was to be the angel of the Lord who called out to stop Abraham from wielding his knife to sacrifice Isaac. As she offered her few lines, she moved toward the actor portraying Abraham, took the knife from his grasp, cradled it, and took it out of the scene. Scripture never tells us what happened to the knife, but Amanda had an idea. Amanda's actions raised new questions for the community about how God views violence. In God's vision of creation made new, weapons of violence—swords and spears—are turned into tools that cultivate flourishing—plowshares and pruning hooks. The attempt to accommodate scripture to people whose primary mode of communication is not oral, or even aural (think Deaf communities also), can lead to insightful interpretive moves and foster richer understandings of the gospel.

## *Prayer*

Megan is a person of prayer. If you share with her that you are sick or disappointed or afraid, she will say to you, "I'll pray for you. I'll pray for you." And she will. Megan rarely speaks in complete sentences, unless they are short, like "I'll pray for you." She usually repeats phrases two or three times because she is accustomed to being misheard or unheard. What are some ways that Megan could lead a congregation in prayer? She would have an extremely difficult time memorizing a

[2] Thanks to Professor Sue Rozeboom, Associate Professor of Liturgical Theology at Western Theological Seminary for helping me gather my thoughts on this matter and for this wording.

prayer, and even if she memorized it, unless it were extremely brief, she could not articulate it before a congregation. Because she cannot read, reading a prayer is not an option for Megan either. What Megan can do is to follow a collaborating prayer leader's visual cue to repeat—with meaning and feeling—a significant word or phrase in a spoken prayer. In this way, Megan is enriching the congregation's prayerful communion with God, amplifying the significance of key words and phrases while directing not only the congregation's, but presumably God's attention, to the meaning and significance of what is transpiring. For both Megan and the congregation, the practice of prayer is expanded and deepened because of Megan's participation in this way. Knowing she is a person of prayer, she is invited by someone to help lead in prayer but is invited in such a way that she might be her own agent to say whether or not she will participate. Megan participates not as a mascot of the disability community nor as an inspirational figure on a pedestal. Megan is a member of the body of Christ, whose life of prayer is indispensable to that body.

## *Witness*

When the church comes together to worship, when people with disabilities find a place of belonging in all aspects of the life of the congregation, then the church is bearing witness to the way of the kingdom of God. The presence of people with disabilities in a congregation using their gifts in the service of the kingdom of God challenges worldly notions of power. Even people who have profound disabilities, those whom many would say lack agency, still shape the community through the things they evoke in others. Consider the witness of John the Baptist. Not the John who preached in the wilderness, the prenatal witness of John who leapt in his mother, Elizabeth's, womb in witness to the unborn Jesus (Luke 1:39-43). Biblical imagery of Christian witness is inclusive of people of all abilities: the body of Christ; a fragrance; a letter written; a light; a taste; the image of God as we are all connected to the one true image of God, Jesus. None of these images of witness require special abilities or capacities, yet, we so often focus on the verbal testimony of people with a certain level of intellect who traffic in words and ideas. We bear witness to the kingdom of God by the things we say, yes, but also by the things we do and the way we are. How might the many modes of communication

highlighted by differing abilities enrich our understanding of Christian witness and the One to whom we bear witness?

I am writing this article while reflecting on 30 years of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), civil rights legislation on behalf of people with disabilities intended to protect their rights and legislate their inclusion into all arenas of society. I'm keenly aware that the ADA did *not* apply to churches. While the benefits of the legislation have been lifechanging for many people, for many their inclusion into spaces and roles previously inaccessible has not necessarily made them feel like they belong. Many people with disabilities inhabit their new roles and spaces in society still with the feeling of being strangers. Legislation and enlightened self-interest among temporarily non-disabled persons is not enough to create spaces of belonging, especially in the church. Congregations can draw upon the enrichment model of disability inclusion grounded in the deeper experience of a shared baptismal identity, in which each member and all members together reflect the image of God. More than fostering an inclusive approach to worship, this mindset will transform the church into truly the body of Christ.

**Recommended Resources**

Hazel Bradley and Jim Cargin. *Creative Ideas for Worship with All Abilities: In Association with L'Arche*. Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019.

Barbara J. Newman. *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship*. Wyoming, MI: All Belong: Center for Inclusive Education, 2016.

Rebecca F. Spurrier. *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Communal Worship*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2019.

Benjamin D. Conner. *Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012.

_____. *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness: Exploring Missiology through the Lens of Disabilities Studies*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018.

**Donald Jackson**

*Letter to the Seven Churches with the Heavenly Choir*

# "Worthy is the Lamb!": Transformative and Saving Worship in Revelation

Alexander E. Stewart*

Revelation has exerted a powerful influence on Christian worship over the centuries. Its visions regularly puzzle interpreters, but its hymns inspire fresh and new expressions of worship in each generation. Apart from its influence on the content of Christian hymns and songs, many readers remain unaware of the broader importance and function of worship in Revelation.[1] In particular, Revelation helps us understand the central role of worship in the salvation and transformation of God's people.

## *Worship and Salvation*

Careful readers of the New Testament recognize a great amount of diversity in the genre, themes, and content of the various biblical books.

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1 For recent studies of worship in Revelation, see Steven Grabiner, *Revelation's Hymns: Commentary on the Cosmic Conflict*, LNTS 511 (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2015); Justin J. Schedtler, *A Heavenly Chorus: The Dramatic Function of Revelation's Hymns*, WUNT 2.381 (Tübingen, GE: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

They are united in one Bible, but they are certainly not monolithic, and the uniqueness of Revelation does not reside solely in its apocalyptic and visionary genre. For example, Revelation does not speak about salvation by grace through faith. When "faith" is mentioned in Revelation it carries the idea of faithfulness or allegiance and not belief (Rev 2:13, 19; 13:10; 14:12; the verb "believe" does not occur in the book) and judgment is according to works (Rev 2:23, 26; 20:12; 22:12). Does this mean that Revelation presents a works-based salvation?

Before answering that question, it is important to consider what seems to take the place of "saving faith" in Revelation, and I would like to suggest that it is "saving worship." Revelation focuses on the verbal expression of belief through proper worship (hymns, acclamations, giving glory to God). The content of the eternal gospel in Revelation is to "fear God and give him glory, . . . and worship him who made heaven and earth" (Rev 14:7; cf. Rev 15:4).[2] Idolatry or misplaced worship is the most fatal sin in Revelation and is an expression of allegiance to the beast (Rev 9:20; 13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4).

Revelation makes it clear that every human being is engaged in worship and the object of one's worship will determine one's eternal destiny. Worship is not peripheral but central to the saving human response to God's great acts of salvation.

Saving worship in Revelation has a strong verbal dimension but we should not limit it to corporate singing or acclamations of praise. Worship is closely connected in Revelation with what it means to overcome or win in the battle for faithfulness in which each Christian is engaged. Worship is thus holistic, and both includes and expresses our faithfulness, obedience, perseverance, and good works. So even though judgment is in accordance with works in Revelation, it is assumed that one's works will match and flow from one's worship. Those who worship rightly will live rightly and will overcome. In addition, those who worship rightly are the same people who experience the benefits of Jesus' sacrificial and victorious death (Rev 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 7:14; 12:11; it is evident in Revelation that Jesus' death is both broadly sacrificial and part of a Christus Victor motif). John is not worried about whether the chicken or the egg came first, whether saving worship proceeds or follows faithful obedience; they are inseparably linked in what it means to overcome.

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[2] All Scripture quotations taken from the English Standard Version.

*Faithful worship is soteriologically necessary because it concretely expresses one's submission, confidence, allegiance, and alignment.*

## *Worship and Transformation: Gaining God's Perspective*

Not only is faithful worship a determinative indicator of who will and will not be saved, it is also transformative. Worship enables the perseverance necessary in order to overcome by helping us see reality more clearly. Worship puts things in their proper place and reshapes our priorities, values, and desires by providing us with God's perspective on reality.

The title, Revelation, comes from the Greek *apokalupsis*, and relates to the uncovering or revealing of something. The first word of the book is "revelation," and the book is first and foremost a "revelation of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1:1). Revelation, however, reveals so much more. Each of the visions and chapters reveals a bit of reality from God's perspective. The book allows us to see things the way that God sees them, and the visions give insights which go beyond physical, material, and visible reality.

An example of how Revelation provides God's perspective comes early in the book in the proclamations to the seven churches. The Christians in Smyrna were politically powerless and economically devastated; they were a poor and abused minority in their city. Jesus recognizes this physical and concrete reality of their desperate situation but provides God's perspective: "I know your suffering and poverty, but you are wealthy" (Rev 2:9). Their faithfulness, obedience, and trust in God meant that they were incredibly wealthy from God's perspective, the only perspective which matters, even if they were dirt poor from the perspective of their neighbors. The opposite of this is evident in the church in Laodicea. They were wealthy, established, and had everything going for them but from God's perspective, they were bankrupt. "Because you say that 'I am wealthy and have become rich and don't have any need', and you don't know that you are wretched and pitiable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev 3:17). God's perspective and verdict is what ultimately matters.

*The book of Revelation calls us to respond properly to God's revelation of reality, and worship calibrates and directs our vision.*

## *The Content of Worship*

A closer look at some of the hymns in Revelation will show how worship guides us to rightly perceive reality; proper vision, in turn, enables us to think, feel, and act rightly.

### Revelation 1:5-6

> "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

This doxology occurs near the beginning of Revelation and calls us as hearers to become active participants in worship and join John in ascribing glory and dominion to Christ. Two features stand out. *First*, traditional Jewish and early Christian doxologies are directed toward God while this one focuses on Jesus. In Revelation, Jesus is included in the worship of the one true God while the worship of angels is strictly forbidden (Rev 19:10; 22:8-9). This is very significant for Christology and later formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

*Second*, in addition to functioning as an expression of worship, this doxology also serves to instruct and teach. We worship Jesus because of what he has done for us in loosing us from our sins and making us a kingdom of priests in fulfillment of God's plan for rescuing his people from Egypt in Exodus 19:6. This pedagogical review of divine action on our behalf is a central feature of many of the hymns in Revelation. Through worship we remind each other of what God has done as a reason to respond with faithful worship. This reminder further strengthens our sense of corporate identity and confidence in God's saving acts. By remembering his work in the past, we have increased confidence for the future.

### Revelation 4:8

> "And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'"

Before considering the hymns of Revelation 4, it is important to reflect on John's vision of God on his throne (Rev 4:2-7). The throne-room vision of Revelation 4 focuses on the one who exercises true

authority and is guiding the destiny of the world in contrast to the physical and visible false claims to power made by human rulers and emperors. Who is really in charge? Who has final authority? The chaos of the world and of history forces this question upon us. Evil so easily seems to win despite our attempts to do right and advance justice. When we look around at the world today, we see problems everywhere. Apart from a global pandemic, there are civil wars, assassinations, the shooting down of civilian airplanes, mass migrations, warnings of environmental collapse due to humanity's mismanagement of creation, fears of a global economic recession, fears of war, fears of political upheaval. Just in the past century, there have been two world wars and several instances of genocide.

When we look at the world with our physical eyes it could seem that evil is winning. The future does not look bright. Later in the book of Revelation, in chapters 12 and 13, we encounter visions which show us the spiritual reality. Not only are we destroying ourselves through our own sin, there are active evil spiritual beings who are misleading, deceiving, and trying to destroy humanity and, in particular, God's people. Before we are shown that vision, however, God gives John a vision of the heavenly throne room. Revelation 4 provides a foundation for all the visions that are to come in the book and provides a foundation for our lives today.

God is on his throne.

No matter what chaos you may be experiencing in your family or your job, God is on the throne.

No matter what sickness you are fighting, God is on the throne.

No matter what sin you may be struggling with, God is on the throne.

No matter what fears you may have about the future, God is on the throne.

No matter how much money you have or don't have in the bank, God is on the throne.

No matter how hard life might get, God is on the throne.

This is the foundational vision God gave John to share with us. God is on the throne and there is no power or force in the universe that is capable

of defeating him or wresting control from him.

The vision of God on his throne leads to worship. In worship we draw our attention away from ourselves, away from our weaknesses, away from our fears and insecurities, away from our problems, and on to God, the creator and sustainer of the universe, our protector, our provider. Our eyes so quickly focus on what we can see physically while worship draws our hearts to focus on spiritual reality.

The hymns of worship in Revelation are included to draw us, as hearers, into worship. They are not there just to give us information about what some angels are doing in heaven but to invite us to join in the rightful worship given by creation to the creator.

As the throne-room vision unfolds, John sees and hears the four living creatures declare, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Rev 4:8). This hymn celebrates the holiness of God, his uniqueness and separateness. God's holiness, by itself, should only produce fear because we are not holy by ourselves. We are not worthy to draw near to God or exist in his presence. Revelation 5 shows us why God's holiness does not need to be a cause of fear; the lamb is worthy. We are not worthy, but the Lamb's blood purchases us for God (Rev 5:9). Because of Jesus we are able to draw near and worship a holy God without fear.

We worship a God who was and is and is to come. This does not just express our faith in God's eternal existence; it expresses our hope in the future. God is not only eternally existent; he is also coming to his creation. He will not remain distant and invisible forever but will one day come physically, materially, and visibly to his creation. He is the one who is to come.

### Revelation 4:11

> "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

This short hymn celebrates God's worthiness to receive our worship. A simple reason is given: He created everything that exists. When we worship, we are drawing near to the one who spoke the universe into existence. God's role as creator, in and of itself, establishes him as the ultimate and true authority and only legitimate object of worship.

Many of the visions in Revelation describe God's judgment of evil as a de-creation. Our confidence in God as creator fills us with hope that the one who creates and de-creates is also able to re-create and usher in

a truly new heaven and earth (Rev 21:1).

### Revelation 5:9-10

> "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

This brief hymn celebrates the fact that Jesus is worthy to fulfill God's plans for his creation because of his sacrificial death. As noted above, it is very significant that Jesus, alongside God, is the recipient of rightful worship.

This hymn also further teaches us as God's people about our identity and destiny. Jesus's death rescued people from every nation and ethnicity and formed us into a united people of God. Our destiny is not determined by the challenges and difficulties of our present life and we know that we will someday participate in God's new creation.

The hymn also teaches us about our purpose in the present time—he purchased us to make us a kingdom and priests. Priests function to represent people to God and to worship God. We are thus God's representatives throughout the world to help others come into a right relationship with God. He also made us a kingdom. In the present time this is an invisible kingdom, as Paul says in Romans 14:17, a kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. The kingdom will not be invisible forever and the final visions of the book of Revelation show the concrete and physical fulfillment of this presently invisible kingdom (Rev 21:1-22:5). This future vision fills us with hope as we persevere through weakness, frailty, and tribulation (cf. Rev 1:9).

The visions in Revelation were never given just to provide information about the future for the intellectually curious—they were written to motivate us and move us to action, to fill us with hope in God's promised future, to move us to repent and to reorient our lives and priorities around God's kingdom. Worship guides and directs our reorientation and transformation.

### Revelation 5:12-13

> "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! . . .

> To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

The final hymn of Revelation 5 unambiguously joins God and the Lamb together as the sole recipients of proper worship. The three hymns of chapter five also demonstrate an expanding choir. The twenty-four elders start with the first hymn in Revelation 5:9-10. They are joined in Revelation 5:11 by a vast number of angels and in Revelation 5:13 by all of creation. Christian hearers are thus invited to join with every created being in the rightful and true worship of the creator and the Lamb.

### Revelation 7:10-12

The worship in Revelation 7 has a similar development. First, all of God's people proclaim, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:10). Both God and the Lamb are proclaimed the owners and source of salvation. Redeemed humans are then joined by all the angels around the throne, the twenty-four elders, and the four living creatures to acclaim, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen" (Rev 7:12). Human beings who are able to stand in the day of God's wrath are pictured as joining in the heavenly worship of the one sitting on the throne and the Lamb. By implication, when we engage in worship and praise in the present time, our worship joins with the worship of these heavenly beings. We thereby rightly align ourselves and pledge our allegiance to the rightful ruler of the world through worship.

### Revelation 11:16-18

> "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth."

This brief hymn celebrates God's final judgment and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth; these things take place with the blowing of the seventh trumpet. Christians hearing this future hymnic celebration are invited to join in the celebration in anticipatory hope.

In our worship we celebrate how things someday will be and we anticipate the final fulfillment of God's promises. We are reminded that the world will not remain in chaos forever, but justice will come, and God will someday renew his creation by destroying the destroyers of the earth. Through worship we experience this future reality, in part, in the present time. This celebration of God's promised future through worship shapes and molds our priorities and desires in the present.

### Revelation 15:3-4

> "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."

This hymn is introduced as "the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb" and much has been written about how it is (or is not) thematically connected to songs attributed to Moses in the Old Testament (Exod 15:1-18; Deut 31:30-32:43; Ps 90). The hymn has many intratextual connections elsewhere in Revelation through its celebration of God's justice and holiness and its implicit call for hearers to fear and glorify God. These themes support the discussion above of "saving worship." The hymn also stresses the universal aspects of God's rule: all nations will come and worship.

### Revelation 16:5-7

> "'Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!' And I heard the altar saying, 'Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!'"

These short statements come in between the pouring out of the third and fourth bowl judgments and celebrate the justice of God's judgments. Modern readers are often uncomfortable with depictions of God's judgments in Revelation because they appear vindictive or excessive. Revelation makes it clear that the judgments are just; God is not capricious, unpredictable, or vindictive. The judgments seem harsh, but we can have trust in the character and intentions of the judge. He will do what is right to restore order and flourishing to his creation which

has been marred and corrupted by evil. Critics of God's judgment generally underestimate the destructiveness and guilt of evil beings (both spiritual and physical) and somehow imagine that moral order can be maintained in the universe without a moral and just lawgiver and judge. God's justice is essential for the existence of a moral order and the differentiation between good and evil.

**Revelation 19:1-8**

> 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants'. . . . 'Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever'. . . . 'Amen. Hallelujah!' . . . 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure'."

This lengthy series of hymns by different speakers highlights many of the themes we have seen previously. God is just in his judgments because the object of judgment corrupted the earth and killed innocent people. God's just judgments have a purifying and cleansing function in creation. The hymns are punctuated by the refrain of "Hallelujah" which means "Praise Yahweh!" The final hymn celebrates the final consummation of God's promises whereby a purified people will experience resurrection life in God's new creation (see the development of the theme of the bride in Rev 21:9-10).

## *Conclusion: Saving and Transformative Worship*

The hymns in Revelation have inspired and informed the content of Christian worship in significant ways. In addition, worship in Revelation seems to take the place of Paul's focus on faith and the focus in John's Gospel on believing as the salvific response to God's saving initiative. Worship demonstrates allegiance and commitment, whether to the Lamb or to the Dragon, his beasts, and Babylon. In addition, worship transforms the worshippers by giving God's people a vision of reality from God's perspective. God is on the throne and is ruling and reigning with

power even though conflict and opposition rage on the earth. The content of the hymns in Revelation regularly stress God's saving power and holy justice, and Revelation continues to call us today to enter the rightful worship directed toward God and the Lamb. Overcomers worship.

**Recommended Resources**

Steven Grabiner. *Revelation's Hymns: Commentary on the Cosmic Conflict* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2015).

Justin J. Schedtler. *A Heavenly Chorus: The Dramatic Function of Revelation's Hymns* (Tübingen, GE: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

M. Eugene Boring. "The Theology of Revelation, 'The Lord Our God the Almighty Reigns'." *Interpretation* 40 (July 1986): 257-269.

Richard Bauckham. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

FAITHFUL LIVES

# *Reviews & Resources*

# Story-Shaped Worship: Following Patterns from the Bible and History

by Robbie F. Castleman. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013. 224 pp. US $22.00, paperback.

The recent pandemic has radically reshaped the way many people engage with the world. Remote working and remote learning have arrested our normal habits and patterns of life, forcing us to adapt to novel circumstances, and to do so separated from previously established relational constructs. Churches are not exempt from this. Though a handful of churches resisted mandated stay-at-home orders, most congregations complied, adopting new practices to fit with the current realities. By forcing churches out of their normal habits, this unforeseen upheaval has provided valuable time for reflection on what it means to be a congregation or to be part of the Church universal. For some congregations, this has raised important questions such as what it looks like to worship together at home (is fog on screen enough or should we send a fog machine to every member of the congregation?!). In a sense, this has forced many Christians to consider a more significant question: what it means to worship.

Robbie Castleman's *Story-Shaped Worship* provides useful reflections on these questions. Though written in 2013, *Story-Shaped Worship* is an excellent and timely resource for pastors, worship leaders, and church members as they wrestle with questions of how to worship during a pandemic. The purpose of the book is "to help evangelicals, especially those in historically independent communities of faith, rediscover in the great story of God's salvation related in the Bible, God's design for worship that is focused on God's pleasure" (p. 13), and to do so by helping "students, teachers, worship leaders and congregations ask better questions about the intention of worship and the God who is worshiped" (p. 23).

Castleman's primary argument is that story-shaped worship is the biblical form of worship, and for Castleman this story-shaped worship

is liturgical, but it is an historically rooted narrative liturgy. In order to support her argument, Castleman articulates a "canonical-theological" (p. 19) model for liturgy studies, arguing that reaching further back beyond the New Testament or church fathers into "the whole of the biblical canon" provides "a uniquely authoritative foundation for such worship" (p. 20). Over the first few chapters, Castleman explores Old Testament understandings of worship. Beginning with the creation narrative, working her way through the first "worship wars" of Cain and Abel, and describing the practices of the Israelites following the exodus from Egypt and the establishment of the Mosaic Covenant, Castleman explains that just as narrative patterns—Passover, Sabbath, etc.—framed the worship experience of Israelites and first-century Jews, so the "patterns of reenactment also serve as a corrective to worship which is designed mainly for the contemporary concerns of a congregation" (p. 58).

Castleman emphasizes liturgy but eschews a simplistic style dichotomy, instead arguing that story-shaped worship has a *pattern* rather than a *style* (p. 16). Thus, liturgy does not require a "return to Rome or Westminster" (p. 14) or a staid formality, nor does liturgical practice preclude worship teams, praise bands, or other features associated with modern evangelical churches. Both "pipe organs" and "praise bands" can help a congregation worship God (p. 92). On the contrary, liturgy, is the means by which proponents of these different styles can be brought together in a unified narrative, bound together in a single, shared story of salvation.

Having established narrative reenactment as a key component of biblical worship, in chapter four Castleman outlines and explains the characteristics of a biblical, or story-shaped worship for Christians. From the call to worship through praise, confession, assurance, hearing the Word, responding to the Word, and benediction, Castleman, explains how each component of this narrative reenactment is grounded in both canonical writings (Exodus, the Psalms, Isaiah, and others) and biblical theology. This is a helpful primer for those who are accustomed to liturgical services but have never considered the reasoning behind the practice, as well as those coming from non-liturgical or even anti-liturgical traditions. Though primarily focused on congregational liturgy, the chapter also contains an all-too-brief section thinking through how the patterns of liturgy are replicated in an individual's average day.

For those concerned that this "liturgical" emphasis would create

an overly universal or rigid practice of the Christian faith, Castleman's position mandates no such thing. In chapters seven and eight, she explains the diversity of practice in the early Church, noting that while the gospels, early epistles, and early Christian writings such as the *Didache* agree on the necessity of baptism or the Lord's Supper, they also illustrate a diversity of practical application. This diversity was replicated by reformers during the Reformations of the sixteenth century. However, these diverse practices all conformed to mandatory patterns. It is only in the eighteenth-twentieth centuries that this flexible, but necessary liturgical tradition is undermined by the anti-clericalism, and individualism of the Enlightenment and the democratization of Christianity encouraged by the Great Awakenings. Although a bit light on scholarly evidence, the point emphasizing the decline of established patterns of narrative reenactment resulting in a de-historicized faith bears contemplation.

Perhaps one of the most appealing and constructive aspects of the book is the "workshops" located at the end of each chapter. These workshops ask a series of diagnostic questions encouraging reflection such as "what parts of the service are practices of reenactment" (p. 59) or "identify ways that a service of worship might be compromised by good intentions that might create a 'dangerous ambiguity' by mixing human agenda with the honor and holiness of God" (p. 109). These reflective practices are useful for pastors, worship leaders, church members, and even individual families thinking through the meaning and purpose of worship, even as the established practices of worship have been upended.

What does it mean to worship and how do we worship during uncertain times? Robbie Castleman's *Story-Shaped Worship* does not definitively answer these questions, but it certainly equips us to answer them in more constructive and biblical ways.

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College of the Ozarks

# Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective

by Andrew B. McGowan. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014. 312 pp. US $32.00, paperback.

Few topics consume church debates more than styles of worship, how (or how often) to practice the Lord's Supper/Eucharist, and the method of preaching. In short, churches argue amongst themselves and individuals argue within their own local churches regarding a single theme: what should Christians do when they gather on Sunday morning? Often, churches make a point of expressing that they are simply trying to do things like the early church, but few consider the complexity of such a claim, due to the diversity of such practices in the early church. To this end, Andrew McGowan has provided an invaluable service to both the church and the academy with this book.

McGowan's task is admittedly a descriptive, not prescriptive, one. His book endeavors "to reconstruct a sense of what was said and done in various ancient churches, not of what ought to have been done, even in the view of the most persuasive or authoritative ancient writers" (p. 14). Nor does McGowan attempt to answer what should be done now. McGowan stays true to his descriptive task, evidenced by his decision to include dancing, foot washing, and kissing, although few liturgical traditions practice these today.

McGowan begins with a definition of worship in the early church, recognizing the modern trend to narrow worship merely to music, or even to Sunday morning services. Worship, McGowan argues, "means these practices that constitute Christian communal and ritual life, as reflected in the NT itself and thereafter, not merely or specifically what the NT itself calls 'worship'" (p. 7). As the title suggests, McGowan does not intend to give a comprehensive survey of the development of

worship throughout church history. Instead, he stops shortly after AD 400. Even in this limited survey, McGowan identifies a common theme of "continuity and change" (p. 17). Although not accepting some of the "grand narratives" of Christian worship that some propose, McGowan does identify a Christian story, one in which "the efforts of Christians to seek, serve, and praise the Maker of all things as revealed in Jesus Christ is the sustained theme" (p. 17).

After defining worship and establishing his scope and purpose in the introduction, McGowan uses chapters two through seven to explore different aspects of ancient Christian worship: meal, word, music, initiation, prayer, and time. In each chapter, McGowan follows a similar pattern. He begins with ancient and Jewish parallels or foundations, then moves on to New Testament witness. He then begins with the earliest evidence from the church fathers and works his way chronologically up to around AD 400. In each chapter, McGowan highlights both the diversity of practice and the unity of purpose.

In chapter two, "Meal," McGowan covers banquets, love feasts, Eucharist/Lord's Supper, and even addresses kissing. McGowan identifies a remarkable diversity and change in practices, yet says it would be misleading to ignore the continuity. Despite a significant change from banquet to sacrament, "[i]n the fourth century as in the first, a diverse group of believers gathered around a table to share simple food, and the Christians prayed and gave thanks to God for the life and work of Jesus, remembering his own acts of eating as they performed their own, affirming his presence in and at their meal" (p. 64). McGowan explores the reading and preaching of the Word in chapter three, noting among other things its connection with the banquet. McGowan asserts that the ministry of the Word "is the key to understanding how the earliest Christians in general knew and received Scripture itself, and how they encountered the God who spoke in Scripture: not for the most part on the page perused privately, but in hearing amidst the communal assembly of the people called by that God" (p. 110). In chapter four, McGowan explores music through discussions of song, instrument, and dance. Although likewise exhibiting diversity, McGowan notes a general lack of instrumental music (which he traces to concern about uses of such instruments in sacrificial cults), but he highlights the overwhelming importance of music in the formation and worship of the Christian community (p. 134). Chapter five, "Initiation," addresses the primary topic of baptism, but also explores anointing and foot washing.

Baptism requires a particularly lengthy and diverse account because of the variety of questions involved. Who should baptize? Who should be baptized? How should they be baptized? Baptism, regardless of the practices, was not merely a "ceremonial development" but "an enacted quest for meaning" (p. 182). McGowan moves on to the topic of prayer in chapter six. His conclusions are perhaps best expressed by his statement that "[p]rayer for the first Christians involved far more than forming and expressing individual ideas or words; it was profoundly communal as well as highly personal, and a matter of body as well as mind" (p. 184). Finally, McGowan considers time, feasts, fasts, and the Christian calendar in chapter seven. Once again, despite much diversity, early Christians agreed that "[f]or them to inhabit time was inescapable and required structures, markers, and indicators of meaning; if the Lord of time was their Lord, then time itself must reflect that sovereignty" (p. 260). In a brief epilogue, McGowan then reminds the reader that "'worship' was not about services, but service; not about gestures that signaled belief or allegiance, but about allegiance itself" (p. 261).

McGowan's work proves to be a valuable addition to the scholarly discussion as well as to the local church. McGowan demonstrates an excellent knowledge of the relevant literature, skillfully providing surveys of a wide range of Eastern and Western sources from the first through early fifth centuries. McGowan consistently presents the diversity in the early church while maintaining a view to its continuity. His statement about prayer is indicative of this strength throughout: "It [history of early Christian prayer] would be better characterized as a rich and varied landscape that offers different vistas or standpoints than as a single or simple picture that merely needs to be retrieved from complexity by excision of extraneous elements" (p. 214). Not only does he faithfully set forward the diversity and continuity of each point, but McGowan steadfastly accomplishes his descriptive task despite numerous opportunities to argue for one tradition over another. In fact, he on several occasions helps remind the reader of the potential pitfalls of trying to force the early church practices into a specific theological tradition. For example, again with respect to prayer, he writes: "To find any such supposed touchstone is actually to choose one element and to relativize the others; such decisions tend to reflect our theological commitments, which may themselves be more or less defensible, but do not emerge via immaculate conception from

the messier history of the church itself" (p. 214). This faithfulness to his descriptive task demonstrates his scholarly aptitude; but perhaps more importantly it generously provides the church with a rich, responsible, balanced history of the diversity of practices of the early church, and yet a confident unity of purpose that continues to the present.

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# Worship by the Book

edited by D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. 256 pp. US $16.99, paperback.

What is the essence of corporate worship? How does the church listen to the biblical story and respond by giving God glory and praise? Is it just the traditions of each denomination that shape our worship? Or is there something more fundamental that informs our worship? In *Worship by the Book*, edited by D. A. Carson with chapters by Mark Ashton, R. Kent Hughes, and Timothy J. Keller, authentic corporate worship originates in the believer's personal devotion to God as he or she responds to the gospel of Jesus Christ and is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Worshipping God for who he is and what he has done is a key theme throughout the biblical narrative. For example, the prophet Amos, in condemning Israel for their sins, echoes the decalogue in his condemnation of their sin:

> I hate, I despise your feasts,
> and I take no delight in your
> solemn assemblies.
> Even though you offer me your
> burnt offerings and grain offerings,
> I will not accept them;
> and the peace offerings of your
> fattened animals,
> I will not look upon them.
> Take away from me the noise of
> your songs;
> to the melody of your harps I
> will not listen.
> But let justice roll down like waters,
> and righteousness like an
> ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24, ESV)

His prophecy of impending judgment stemmed from Israel's lack of faithfulness in rightly living out the covenant. They were politically stable, economically prosperous and, in their minds, blessed by God. Yet, their acts of injustice and corruption created a stench in their sacrifices and offerings. Their acts of worship were hollow and rejected by God because their lives were not faithful to the covenant promises of their God. Their personal actions and devotion to God didn't line up with their corporate worship of God, and the story of God's acts they remembered in their corporate worship did not inform their personal love of God. There was a gap between the two and a reformation of heart and a reformation of worship was needed in their return to God.

The biblical theology of worship stated in *Worship by the Book* encourages the reader to examine the root of corporate worship to hopefully stimulate a robust understanding of the patterns of worship throughout western world Protestant churches. The hope of the volume is that church leaders will find a biblical theology of worship that can shape a biblically robust reformation of corporate worship that neither innovates for the sake of relevance with the culture nor maintains traditional forms of worship for the sake of conservation.

The work is arranged with a chapter written by each of the four authors. Each is committed to the church, either serving as a pastor when the work was written (Mark Ashton, R. Kent Hughes, and Timothy J. Keller) or deeply involved in the training of pastors and other church leaders (D. A. Carson). The work is not intended as a comprehensive theology of worship. Through specific examples of worship services, it seeks to demonstrate, from different denominational perspectives (Anglican, Free Church, Presbyterian), how a biblical theology of worship informs the flow and elements of corporate worship. Although the book was written in the early 2000s, it continues to have value today precisely because its authors attempt to apply a biblical theology of worship to their individual context. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted how the church gathers for worship and the forms of worship for many churches. It is precisely during an event like this that we need to reflect on the nature of worship and our corporate practices.

The first chapter is the broadest of the work and shapes the discussion for the specific denominational examples of corporate worship that follow. Carson stakes out his commitment to biblical theology as

the best means of describing how the practice of worship is informed through theological reflection. His discussion covers the move in the biblical narrative from the "place" where worship occurs in the formalized religious life of the people of Israel (Tabernacle, Temple) to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the life of each believer. For example, Paul writes to the Romans: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). Worship is no longer located in one place, but rather encompasses all of life. This feature of all-of-life-worship is evident in the OT, but is made explicit in the NT. Carson's definition of worship, though lengthy and complex, describes worship as the creature's response to the works of God, especially through the gospel of Jesus Christ, to delight in God for who He is and what He has done. This delight in God's work is both on the personal level and with other believers, for each other's mutual edification and is focused on the integration of personal worship which informs both corporate worship and the believer's actions in the world (or, ethic).

In the chapters that follow, each author lays out his rationale for the style and content of corporate worship in his tradition. The strength of these chapters is that each demonstrates a commitment to the centrality of the Word of God to inform and shape worship. These are practical chapters that are often transparent in what motivates the particular way a tradition orders worship. There are a number of ways that each tradition agrees with the others in the flow of worship as well as areas of theological difference. The latter, of course, is to be expected and it does not take away from the work but demonstrates one of the strengths of Protestantism: the priesthood of the believer and the centrality of one's personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ and the power of that relationship to shape one's life.

I encourage readers to take up this work and freshly review it. The biblical theology is sound and the application of that theological commitment to specific services (with commentary) is enlightening. This type of theological reflection on worship would do churches well, as the COVID-19 pandemic has rearranged the corporate gatherings of churches throughout the world, and especially in North America. How would these principles apply to church online? What does a biblically faithful online worship gathering look like in an Anglican, a Baptist, a Presbyterian, or a Charismatic context? One can only hope

that those involved in planning and shaping our corporate gatherings are prayerfully considering the 'why' of worship and not just the 'how.'

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# You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit.

By James K. A. Smith. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016. 210 pp. US $19.99, hardcover.

We have likely all experienced the emotional deflation following the news that a close friend or family member "just can't be there," or "has too much going on to make it." Perhaps, like me, you have thought to yourself, *I get it…but, we all have time for the things we want to do.* While we might be sympathetic to the rushing pace of life, we feel let down because we know there are deeper priority issues at play. While such thoughts may not be entirely grace-filled in the moment, James K. A. Smith has confirmed our deep suspicions in his book *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*—we do what we want.

Smith is not insinuating that we are all superficial pleasure seekers, simply pursuing what feels good in whatever form we can find it. No. The point he is arguing in this condensed version of a frequently worked[1] thesis is that our actions and habits ("we *do*") are shaped by what we deeply desire ("what we *want*"). Smith writes, "Our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow" (p. 2). For this reason, Smith believes that Christian worship and discipleship are more concerned with the hungers of our hearts than our mental ascent to theological information.

In the first chapter, titled "To Worship is Human," Smith lays out a renewed vision of Christian anthropology that pushes against the Cartesian model of *I am what I think*. In his evaluation, Western civilization has drunk so deeply from the well of the Enlightenment that we have adopted a vision of humanity "that reduces human beings to brains-on-a-stick" (p. 3). In contrast, Smith discusses the biblical notions of

[1] See other works like *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013) and *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

"heart" and purpose (or *telos*) that animate our desires, pulling us toward the vision of the good life we all deeply want (p. 12). As a virtue, love is an internal disposition (p. 17) that develops from our character. But, the question Smith seeks to answer is "How do I acquire such virtues?" (p. 17). The answer summarizes the central thread of this volume: "If you are what you love, and your ultimate loves are formed and aimed by your immersion in practices and cultural rituals, then such practices fundamentally shape who you are" (p. 22).

Chapter 2, "You Might Not Love What You Think," seeks to expose the reality that while we are shaped by our deepest desires, we might not always be aware of what those deepest desires truly are. In this chapter, Smith takes the language of worship (i.e., liturgy) and brings it into the realm of our everyday existence ("secular"). The word "secular" is in scare quotes, because Smith is not making a statement about worship, but an assessment of what we often perceive as "secular." Smith comments, "We need to become aware of the importance of the adaptive unconscious that governs our action. Second, we will then see cultural practices *as* liturgies—and hopefully wake up to their (de) formative power" (p. 38). The point is that our lives are filled with practices, from watching sporting events to going to shopping centers, that are shaping our lives *and* our hearts. Smith encourages his readers to begin to probe these "secular" liturgies, seeking to discern their potential for shaping our lives and our worship. Every aspect of our lives is rooted in an ultimate understanding of "who we are and what we're for," and we must make sure that the habits and patterns of our lives are not aimed at, or propelling us toward, what Smith calls "rival kingdoms" (p. 47).

Smith's response to the reality that our hearts are frequently diverted into "secular" liturgies that can distort our wants is to revisit the liturgies that have shaped Christian worship for the last two thousand years. In a chapter subtitled "Historic Worship for a Postmodern Age," he argues that the process of developing new desires is possible, but it requires an intentional effort that will eventually give way to something that feels like second nature. An example he provides that resonates particularly with me, is his own personal development into a "runner." He chronicles his journey from being a person who never wanted to run or exercise to one that feels anxious if he doesn't get to run. "By submitting myself to this exercise regimen, I've basically become *a different person*: I'm now the guy who *wants* to work out," (p. 62, emphasis mine). There

are clearly many things about him that remain the same, but developing new habits and practices simultaneously began to develop new desires. For those familiar with the New Testament, it is not a far step from the metaphor of physical fitness to spiritual fitness (1 Cor. 9:24-27, 1 Tim. 4:7). Smith draws upon the historic practices of the church—that is, Christian liturgies that have shaped worship for centuries. Acts like baptism, communion, corporate worship, hearing the preaching of Scripture, prayer, and fasting serve as the "conduits of transforming grace" (p. 68) that shape the believing community. For those who may view such planned and rote aspects of Christian worship as inauthentic or "canned," Smith argues that the worship is ultimately not to be perceived as individual self-expression, but a biblically shaped *response* to God's self-revelation.

In chapter 4, "What Story Are You In?" Smith sets out the coherent story for the Christian faith that shapes the structure of Christian worship: gathering, listening, communing, sending (p. 96). After providing a brief biblical justification for these categories, he also recognizes that not every church's worship is shaped by these categories. While some might see his comments here as a bit divisive, ultimately Smith invites Christians into practicing patience. The final three chapters of the book flesh out Smith's thesis in the everyday contexts of the home ("Guard Your Heart: The Liturgies of the Home"), education ("Teach Your Children Well: Learning by Heart"), and work ("You Make What You Want: Vocational Liturgies").

Overall, Smith's volume is an accessible and thoughtful exploration into the Christian life, discipleship, and worship. Some readers may balk at his appeal to historic liturgical worship experiences, but whether one seeks to embrace Smith's vision of a corporate worship service or not, there is much here to enrich the believer's understanding of a life lived toward God. If anything, *You Are What You Love* is a needed reminder in our busy lives that we do what we want…perhaps even when we are unaware of what we want. I believe this book can helpfully make us more aware of what we truly desire, and aid us in setting our hearts toward the One we *should* desire.

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