

The Conversation of Worship

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It is hard to overestimate the damage that the topic of worship has done to the church, particularly in recent times. The fact that this topic is often referred to as “war”—as in “worship wars,” is not entirely hyperbole. Churches have been split, and pastors have found themselves on the unemployment line for daring to tackle the topic of worship. People from both sides of the aisle have launched a seemingly endless volley of names and charges at those who disagree with them. Charges run the gamut from “You do not really love God” to “You are narrow-minded and blind.”

The reason behind this problem cannot be the lack of a clarion call from Scripture to worship. One can hardly read the Bible without sensing on virtually every page this call of God to worship and a pastor cannot pretend to preach the whole counsel of God without addressing the topic of worship. So why is this subject so controversial? It almost certainly stems from confusion about what worship really is coupled with a refusal to submit to the commands of God about biblical worship.

A survey about worship will undoubtedly find people’s idea of worship closely connected with feelings or emotions. A service is considered worshipful when a certain mood has been created, a mood that is often evaluated by the cultural or social baggage that one brings to his religious experience. The buzz, the feeling, the emotional movement—a state of excitement, or reflection, or both, are the bases on which someone evaluates worship service. In pursuit of this, some churches have set out to create the perfect worship atmosphere, perhaps with low lights, great bands, or candles. Others use quiet meditation, organ accompaniment, and robes for the pastor. In some cases, one can walk away from the service feeling like it was a “great worship service” while being unable to recall even basic information about the message brought from Scripture. On the other end, the mood is evaluated by similar standards with a different outcome. These assert that “if my flesh likes it, it cannot be true worship.”

In the midst of this confusion, many have lost sight (if they ever had it) of the fact that true biblical worship has primarily to do with a glad and necessary response of life to the truth about God communicated in his Word through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Let us examine this definition in more detail by examining it in order of priority, and then propose a paradigm for corporate worship.

A Proposed Definition of Biblical Worship

In the first place, biblical worship is inseparably connected with truth about God. Man, by nature, is a worshipper. He has an instinctive awareness of something bigger than himself, and he is therefore always in search of this “something bigger.” It is manifested in daily life in the virtual idol status that is given to athletes, actors or actresses, successful businessmen, and even church leaders, who are seen as possessing one or more characteristics that evoke a sense of awe and amazement. Yet this instinct for worship can only be truly satisfied in God alone. Man worships at the altar of lesser gods—people, pleasures, or ideas—because he has no compelling

vision of the greatness of the one true and living God. Until such a vision is gained, man's instinct to worship will be pursued in these lesser gods.

The instinct to worship derives from the image of God in man. In every human, there is the innate knowledge of the transcendent God. It is a knowledge mediated both internally (through conscience; Rom 2:14-16) and externally (through creation; Psa 19:1-4; Rom 1:18-20). However, this knowledge is only completed and made intelligible through the special revelation of God. In this age, only through Scripture can the truth about God be known in such a way as to call forth genuine worship.

In the second place, biblical worship is based on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Mankind, by nature and choice, is sinful. Sin has affected every area of his being, including his mind and affections resulting in man's inability to properly process truth respond to it appropriately. The problem of sin is an insurmountable barrier to the worship of God apart from the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, worship took place in conjunction with the sacrifices in accord with the revelation of God, sacrifices which pictured the coming final sacrifice of Christ. In the New Testament, we recognize that "God...in these last days, has spoken to us in his Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2). The perfection of Christ combined with his work on the cross is the only way to remove the sin problem, and therefore is the sole ground on which we can approach God in true worship. Worship that is not based on the person and work of Jesus Christ is worship that cannot deal with sin. Therefore, sin must be dealt with by the work of Christ in his life and death and by the confession and submission of the worshipper to the lordship of Christ. By doing this, the mind and affections can be prepared to receive the truth of God, wherever it is found in Scripture.

In the third place, biblical worship is a glad and necessary response of man. Having received the cleansing of sin brought by Christ and having received the truth of God brought by Scripture, there is a response drawn forth from the heart of man that employs his whole being—mind, will, and emotions. We first note that the response is drawn forth by the truth, not worked up by manipulation. Many worship services in modern churches depend heavily on the ability of the worship leaders (whether the pastor or the musicians) to manipulate a response from the hearers. Before one jump too heavily on the use of certain types of music or humor, we should not fail to admit that emotional stories and thirty-seven verses of "Just As I Am" with the choir humming softly in the background is scarcely different. When someone comes face to the face with the truth *about* God *from* God, the response will not need to be manipulated. It will be drawn forth irresistibly or necessarily. While manipulation can ply on the emotions, only truth can break the heart and the will. The truth about God clearly communicated will compel the tender heart to submission. Only sin (hardheartedness against the truth) can prevent the response.

The response should also be glad. Worship should be joyful. This joyful worship should not be confused with loudness and energy, physical demonstration, or gladness of heart, though it may include all of those things. Glad worship can also take place in times of quiet reflection, in times of mourning over sin and the sweetness of repentance, and in times of struggle with life circumstances. Gladness in worship is the state of the heart overwhelmed with the sovereign control of a loving and just God, no matter the life context. Such a heart may grieve and cry, but

it will be glad in God. Gladness in worship is not contrary to sorrow for sin brought on by truth, or sadness for what may be a difficult life circumstance. It is a part of it.

It is sometimes said that “Worship is all about God, not about us.” Such a statement is well-meaning, but is perhaps an overstatement. While worship is driven solely by truth about God and directed solely to God, biblical worship does have effects in the life of the worshipper. Worship is designed by God, not only to bring glory to himself, but to bring confidence and joy to the worshipper. Psalms, the hymnbook of ancient Israel, is filled with references to the effect that truth rejoiced in and reflected back to God has in the life of the worshipper. Singing with joy (Psa 92:4) or gladness (Psa 30:11), or finding comfort (Psa 86:17) or assurance (Psa 118:6) is a legitimate effect of worship on the worshipper. Thus, the pursuit of personal joy through genuine worship is a valid biblical pursuit, provided that the soul finds this joy in the incomparable greatness of God as revealed in Scripture. This pursuit, however, is secondary to praising God for the sake of God himself, both for his character (who he is) and his works (what he does). A theology of worship that removes any benefit for the worshipper seems most assuredly a defective view of worship.

In the fourth and final place, true biblical worship is the response of life. Too often, worship is relegated to an hour on Sunday morning where the church corporately gathers with her guests to sing, pray, give, and hear the Word preached. These services are sometimes considered dead and lifeless. Perhaps the reason why many worship services are considered dead and lifeless is because people have failed to worship God with their life for the previous 167 hours and will leave to return to a life of self-worship rather than God worship. The worship of Sunday morning is, in many respects, a continuation of what has occurred for the past week. A life spent consuming the world for six days will find it hard to hunger for God in true worship on the seventh day. Worship is a time for the readjustment of priorities and realignment of lives, but one hour a week can scarcely undo the disorder brought by the modern consumer mindset.

For worship to be biblical, therefore, it must be a glad and necessary response of life to the truth about God communicated in his Word through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Biblical worship is not about how people feel when they leave the building, nor is it about whether or not emotions were stirred, though genuine worship should result in changed feelings and emotions. Biblical worship is first and foremost about the truth of God, in his person and work through Jesus Christ, communicated to the hearer, drawing forth the response of the spirit to that truth. Simply put, biblical worship is a conversation between man and God, where God speaks and man responds.

A Proposed Paradigm for Corporate Worship

For worship to fit the proposed definition there must be both a reception of the truth and a response to the truth. The idea known as the Regulative Principle teaches that God has ordained the manner in which this reception and response should be carried out. The Westminster Confession of Faith is a widely recognized formulation of the Regulative Principle.

WCF 21:1 The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture

The Regulative Principle is the expression of the Reformer's desire to return to *sola Scriptura*. Believing that the Scripture was sufficient for all things, it necessarily followed that it was sufficient to declare how the church should approach God in worship.¹ Frame says "Everything we do in worship must be divinely warranted."² Or as Pratt puts it, "We must have positive biblical support for all that we do in worship."³

The Regulative Principle distinguishes between the elements of worship (the constituent parts of it) and the circumstances (place, time of day, use of bulletins, musical instruments, etc.). The circumstances are the way in which we observe or practice the elements. The elements are prescribed while the circumstances are left to the discretion of the church.

Though the Regulative Principle is an ongoing topic of debate, it is generally agreed that there are five elements of worship prescribed in Scripture and therefore necessary for the church. Those five elements are 1) Reading of Scripture, 2) Prayer, 3) Singing, 4) Preaching, and 5) Sacraments or Ordinances. The intent here is not to make an argument for the Regulative Principle, nor to answer objections or address the suggested weaknesses of it. Rather, having previously defined worship as a conversation, the intent is to show how the conversation of worship is warranted by Scripture and should be considered as a paradigm for corporate worship.

God speaks to us through his word and its truth.

Since worship is the glad and necessary response to the truth of God, biblical worship must begin with the truth of God declared to the church. God speaks to the church in four primary ways defined in Scripture.

God speaks to us when Scripture is read.

The public reading of Scripture is a feature of the corporate worship of God's people, both in the Old Testament and New Testament. Public reading of Scripture was found during the

¹ See D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2002), pp. 77ff.

² John M. Frame, "A Fresh Look at the Regulative Principle," www.reformedperspectives.org/newfiles/joh_frame/frame.ethics2005.afreshlookattheregulativeprinciple.pdf, accessed 17 Dec 06.

³ Richard L. Pratt, "The Regulative Principle," www.reformedperspectives.org/newfiles/ric_pratt/th.pratt.reg.prin.pdf accessed 17 Dec 06.

wilderness wanderings (Exod 24:7), the great reformation of Josiah (2 Kings 22-23), and the return of the exiles under Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh 8-9). In each of these cases, as well as more that could be cited, the public reading of Scripture played a major and vital role in the revival and growth of God's people. This practice was carried over into NT Judaism, seen in the life of Christ (Luke 4:16ff) and Paul (Acts 13:15ff; esp. v. 27), though the reading of the word was typically not mixed with submission in those who heard it.

Paul considered his own writings as authoritative and worthy of public reading. He command the public reading of Scripture in 1 Timothy 4:13 ("Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture"), Colossians 4:16 (When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea), and 1Thessalonians 5:27 (I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.) Likewise, the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation were to be read to the churches, as the message of Jesus Christ to the people. Thus, the mandate for the public reading of Scripture seems clear.

However, the public reading of Scripture may be the most uncommon of worship practices in modern churches, particularly in fundamentalism. Though we have long and rightly emphasized the preaching of the word, we have often overlooked the naked reading of the Word. It is generally not viewed as a dynamic part of the worship, and perhaps viewed by many as boring and uninteresting.

What is striking in the OT passages is that the people's attention was focused on the Scriptures for lengthy periods of time. They would stand while the Law was read from for hours at a time—from "early morning until midday" in Nehemiah 8:3 and for a fourth of the day in Nehemiah 9:3.⁴ In our modern culture of constant visual and aural stimulation, our attention span struggles with just a few verses of reading, much less more lengthy passages. This failure to discipline the mind to hear the reading has robbed the church of a blessing that comes from obedience to this command of God. The reading of Scripture calls for our rapt attention on every word, trying to gather in not just the words of Scripture but their relationship to one another, trying to understand the point that is being made.

There are a number of ways in which the public reading of the Word can be carried out. It can be done by a single person reading aloud to the assembled congregation, by means of responsive reading (alternating verses between a solo leader and the unison reading aloud of the congregation), or by having the congregation read aloud together. A variety of practice can be beneficial in exposing ourselves to the Word of God through the bare reading of Scripture without comment.

⁴ It may be that these long sessions also included "translating to give the sense" of the Scripture, which would be preaching.

God speaks to us when Scripture is preached and taught.

God is also heard when Scripture is taught or preached.⁵ With the accurate handling of the Word of God, the preacher becomes the voice of God to the gathered congregation. Therefore, when a preacher or teacher stands up with God's word, he is bound to communicate the truth of the text to his audience. When the preacher accurately communicates that truth, it is not the word of man but the word of God. Sidney Greidanus says,

Contemporary preaching of the gospel ... is an indispensable link in the chain of God's redemptive activity ... This high view of preaching can never be the boast of preachers, of course; it can only underscore their responsibility. For with the prophets we noticed that their authority did not reside, ultimately, in their calling or office but in the words they spoke, whether they were from the Lord. So it is with preachers today: they have a word from the Lord, but only if they speak the *Lord's* word. The only norm we have for judging whether preachers speak the word of the Lord is the Bible.⁶

Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with references to the communication of the message of God in preaching. Two notable passages are found in Nehemiah and 2 Timothy. In Nehemiah, at the restoration of the people to the land, a number of men "explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading" (Nehemiah 8:7-8). Here, preaching is seen to involve the explanation of Scripture in order to give people understanding of it with its commands and demands of God on their lives. In 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul commands Timothy to "Preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction." Here, preaching is seen to be the heralding or proclaiming of the Word, in all circumstances, with the goal of bringing the hearer under the power of the commands and demands of God. In essence, these two passages communicate the same basic idea of preaching: Tell people exactly what God has said and what they should do in light of what God has said.

The Bible places great emphasis placed on preaching and teaching the word in the corporate life of the church⁷ and double honor to be given to elders who do it well (1 Tim 5:17).⁸ Today, that emphasis too often takes a back seat to good administrators or executives, or even good communicators who do not handle the truth faithfully. The pastor is too often judged by his

⁵ It is doubtful to this author that there is a great difference between teaching and preaching. Every teaching session should include some "preaching" in the form of a call to change something in our lives to conform it to God's word. Every preaching session should include in it the teaching of truth so that there is something to which the listen should respond. The bottom line is that when the word of God is rightly handled, God is speaking.

⁶ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 9.

⁷ Cf. Matt 28:19-20; Luke 24:46-47; Acts 1:8; 2:42; 6:2-4; 8:4-5; 1 Tim 4:11-15; Titus 1:9. Consider also that of the qualifications for pastor, only two are related to skill sets: able to teach and able to manage (1 Tim 3:2, 4-5). The other qualifications all deal with character.

⁸ Double honor here probably include honor of all kinds, including monetary remuneration.

ability to communicate rather than his ability to faithfully exposit the Word. It is also lost in the midst of activities that a church pursues: the socials, the exercise clubs, the concerts, the programs, or the band. The contemporary church has too easily dispensed with solid, expositional preaching.

Paul warned of a day when people would not endure sound doctrine, choosing to turn away to other kinds of teachers (2 Tim 4:3-4). The word translated *doctrine* is from the same word translated just a line later as *teacher*. Implicit is the idea of rejecting sound doctrine is the rejection of the preacher who proclaims such doctrine. At the same time, these itching ears will not endure silence. They will gather for themselves a different kind of preacher with a different kind of message—myth instead of truth. At the heart of this warning is the implication that people are driving the pulpit. A people driven pulpit will always tend towards myth, while a Bible driven pulpit will tend towards truth.

It is hard to conceive of a more accurate description of the modern day than what is found in 2 Timothy 2:3-4. Many compelling, winsome, and gifted communicators gather a crowd, not because of the biblical content, but because they scratch the itch. Too often the Scriptures are called on to support the worldly way of doing things rather than offering a divine and radical substitute. The pastor becomes a group counselor rather than a prophetic voice. Preaching has been relegated to moralistic lessons rather than divine mandates. This is a tragedy of unimaginable proportions.

In some cases, the preaching is driven not by the desires of the hearer but rather by the pet issues of the preacher. This is equally bad. The pulpit cannot become a soap box for the preacher's pet issues—his theological, psychological, social, or political speculations. Biblical preaching must be driven by the text being brought to bear on the lives of the hearers. Preachers must ask the question, Is the Bible necessary to preach this sermon? If it is not, then he must question whether or not he is speaking for God or for himself. A preacher is to be the voice of God to people, and therefore, must call on the Word of God to change the people of God through the communication of the truth of God applied to life, calling people to submission to the lordship of Christ.

Cotton Mather said, "The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men."⁹ While we might take issue with the eschatological implications of that statement, it is undeniable preaching should be done with the goal of calling all humanity to submission to the lordship of Christ. Worship can never take place so long as man's heart is ruled by anyone or anything other than Christ. Preaching is therefore part of worship, in that it lays the truth about God and from God before the hearer and calls him to a glad and necessary response of submission.

Biblical preaching must address the thought processes from which our actions derive and then address the behavior itself. Wrong behavior is no accident. It is the outgrowth of wrong beliefs about God and the gospel. The preacher must bring the Bible to bear on the thinking of

⁹ Cotton Mather, *Student and Preacher, or Directions for a Candidate of the Ministry* (London: Hindmarsh, 1726), v, cited in John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 22.

the hearers, so that their view of God is radically changed by the Scriptures thereby producing godliness in their lives.

Preaching must handle the text accurately if it is to be worship and to draw forth worship. Drawing forth a response to falsehood is not biblical worship, no matter how well intentioned or persuasive the speaker might be. True preaching must take the text and, in the words of Nehemiah, “translate it to give the sense so that they understand the reading.” To fail to “give the sense” is to fail to worship God. It is, in fact, to erect a substitute god and call people to worship that.

When a text is distorted, it is to the detriment both of the preacher and the hearer. Peter warned of those who, as “untaught and unstable” would distort the Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15-16). Paul exhorted Timothy to “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you. (1 Timothy 4:16). Care must be taken because of the fact that preaching is the voice of God and there is the expectation of authority in it.

Today, many are trying to “dumb down” Christianity to make it appealing to the world. For many, preaching is an attempt to be funny, clever, and relevant. However, the true relevance of Christianity is found in its dissonance from the world and all its values. We are not bringing Christ down to the world. Our call is to bring the world up to Christ. God is seeking worshippers, not people who feel better about themselves. God is seeking people who will be “addressed, undressed, and redressed” before him each week.¹⁰ He is seeking people who will fall before him in submission to his word. Showing the relevance of the word of the Lord to a world steeped in ungodliness does not require compromise. In fact, it demands clarity without compromise.

When the truth of God’s word is clearly preached, God is worshipped with the result that people are rightly taught the true meaning and implications of the text, and thereby are called into a response of submission to the lordship of Christ. Only when this has happened, can biblical worship take place. Preaching is not an add-on to worship, or something that the church does after worship (i.e., music). It is a part of worship and it draws forth biblical worship through its call to submission.

God speaks to us when songs that communicate truth about him are sung.

A third way that God speaks is through the singing of his truth. The Psalms, the worship texts of ancient Israel, were filled with truth about God in his person and work on behalf of his people. The titles of many psalms reflect their use in temple worship. They were likely not read, as we normally handle them today, but rather were sung corporately or by a choir as the expression of the heart in response to the greatness of God. The New Testament contains texts that were possibly hymns of the early church (cf. Phil 2:5-11; 1 Tim 3:16).

¹⁰ Michael Horton, *A Better Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 180.

The role of singing in worship is two-fold. Singing is first directed to God as praise. These are songs not sung about God so much as they are sung to God.¹¹ Songs are also directed to others as teaching. Ephesians 5:17 and Colossians 3:16 both speak of the teaching and admonishing aspect directed to one another in the music of the church.¹² As such, singing in the church fulfills a didactic purpose as the congregation rehearses the truth about God corporately so that all assembled are both teaching and being taught. Thus singing is a proclamation of truth.

Because music teaches and proclaims truth about God, it supplements the pulpit ministry.¹³ What is sung is just as important as what is said. Therefore, the foremost requirement for worship music is doctrinal fidelity. A song that communicates doctrinal error must be rejected. A song may be acceptable if it is imprecise, or incomplete. It is not acceptable if it inaccurate.

In evaluating songs, we must also evaluate the intelligibility of a song. Wording that engenders confusion or obfuscation are little better than songs that communicate error. In some cases, the lack of clarity stems from obtuse poetry or stilted syntax driven by the need to conform to a poetic form rather than the need to clearly communicate. Such lack of clarity can be minimized by explanation, but perhaps should be used sparingly. In other cases, lack of clarity stems from unfamiliar words, some of which should be explained and others that should be abandoned. If people do not understand what they are singing, they are not worshipping.¹⁴

A song should also be appropriate in its presentation, both textually and musically. It must correspond to the God whom we worship. Since it is possible to say right things but in a wrong way for the occasion or the person we are talking to, the style of the words as well as the style of the music must be carefully evaluated for its suitability and appropriateness in worship.

God speaks to us through the ordinances.

The fourth way that God speaks to us is through the ordinances. The ordinances are symbols of God's saving truth, and are ways in which the church proclaims the message of God to others. Baptism, the initial confession of Christ as Lord and Savior, and Communion, the remembrance of Christ's death and our participation in it are acts of proclamation of the gospel

¹¹ See discussion of this below.

¹² While there is a technical distinction between a hymn, an anthem, a song, etc., these distinctions are not useful for this discussion, though they are not without merit.

¹³ There is too often an unfortunate distinction between "worship" and "preaching." I would suggest this distinction may arise from the (false) idea that worship is an emotional response, and since music most easily draws forth that emotional response (often without respect to the song text), it is most closely associated with worship. The argument here is that preaching is as much worship as music.

¹⁴ I would suggest that the first priority of a hymnwriter be doctrinal accuracy in intelligible form. Rhyme and meter should be secondary.

through signs. In carrying these out, we instruct hearers and participants of the saving truths of the gospel and the implications that it has for life.

Summary

These four practices—public reading of Scripture, preaching, singing, and the ordinances—are the ways that God speaks to us and they are necessary for biblical worship since biblical worship can never take place until the worshipper has heard from God. While the musical forms or the preaching styles may vary, the voice of God is heard where the truth of Scripture is properly handled and proclaimed with the goal of giving hearers greater understanding and calling them to submission to the lordship of Christ.

Horton points to the historical record that revival of proclamation in teaching and preaching leads to a revival of genuine worship.

Every great revival of worship, including the creation of new hymns and more faithful as well as understandable liturgies, has come on the heels of a great reformation of church proclamation and teaching. When God’s people understand who God is, who they are in his presence, and what is happening to them when they come into his presence, not only their minds but their hearts are transformed. These great periods always involve two things that seem contradictory at first: a massive clash with the world and a worldly church, and a renewed sense of the immense relevance of forgotten truths and practices in a new setting.¹⁵

This speaking from God has to take the primary or foundational role in biblical worship. It is absolutely indispensable for a vibrant, healthy, and challenging worship service.

We respond to God in light of his truth

The speaking of God is only half of worship, however. The voice of God comes in revelation in order to call the hearer to a response. This inward response is also an indispensable part of worship. There are five primary ways in which the church responds to God in corporate worship.

We respond to God through singing

In discussing music above, we asserted that music is both vertical (directed to God) and horizontal (directed to others in teaching about God). There, we addressed the horizontal role of music in proclaiming the truth of God and about God to one another in song. The use of music discussed in this section is primarily the vertical use of music—to God—particularly in light of

¹⁵ Horton, *A Better Way*, p. 14. Incidentally, Horton’s comments seem to intimate a distinction between worship and preaching.

the truth of God that we know or that has been communicated to us. In Ephesians 5, such singing is in the context of Spirit filling (v. 18) and giving thanks (v. 20). In Colossians 3, it is in the context of the changed life and letting the word of God dwell in us richly. These texts indicate that music should flow from the heart that is being changed, and should be directed to God in praise for this change of heart.

The response in music can be an expression of direct worship and praise, an expression of submission or prayer, or an expression of a testimony. Songs should be carefully chosen to reflect right sentiments and right responses. It may take the form of expressly biblical phraseology, such as metrical Psalms. It may also take more modern forms. Today, many churches use hymns that date from the first millennia of church history right up through the present generation. The choice of music in planning the response of singing should take note of the same concerns delineated above of doctrinal fidelity, intelligibility, and propriety. A response is not true biblical worship if it is not an appropriate sentiment called forth from the Scripture that is understood by the worshipper.

The congregation should be encouraged to sing to God, even though it may be an uncomfortable mental transition for some. In this respect, singing should be considered no different than prayer. It is the expression of the heart directed to God himself.

In most services, it seems customary to begin with singing and end with preaching. Such an order, while traditional, puts us in the position of worshipping God on the basis of remembered truth (which is fine), rather than freshly presented truth (which may be better). For this reason, many churches use a “Call to Worship” consisting of a passage of Scripture to set the theme for corporate worship. An alternative may be to move the preaching of the Word to an earlier place in the service, and close with a carefully planned response of music following the message that consists of more than one song.

We respond to God through prayer.

Prayer is an obvious part of our conversation with God. But often, to the person in the pew, it is an undervalued part. It is perhaps even something to be endured rather than participated in. Prayer should be the time of the service where we bind our hearts together corporately to implore God for his blessing and help on our behalf. Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple goes on for 29 verses in 1 Chronicles 6. Many of the Psalms are prayers set to music. The early church was devoted to prayer as seen both in the book of Acts and the epistles.¹⁶ Prayer is a necessary part of corporate worship.

It would be wise to consider times of both corporate, or public prayer, as well as times of private prayer in the service. Giving time for silence of heart and imploring people to call on God privately to use the light of his truth proclaimed to change to their own lives and the lives of

¹⁶ E.g., Acts 1:14, 24; 2:42, 4:24-31; 6:4; 6:6; 8:14; 12:5-12; 13:3; 14:23; 21:5; Rom 12:12; 15:30; 2 Cor 9:14; Eph 1:16; 6:18-20; Phil 1:4, 9, 19; 4:6; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 3:10; 5:17; 2 Thess 1:11; 3:1; 1 Tim 2:1; 8; 1 Tim 5:5; Jam 5:13-18; 1 Peter 4:7; Jude 1:20.

others is a vital part in leading the church in prayer and in teaching the church to pray. It would be wise for the worship leader not to be afraid of silence in corporate worship, but rather to encourage directed silence—silence of personal prayer directed towards a specific request of God for the service.

Pastoral prayers are important in not only calling on God for his mercy and truth, but in teaching others to pray. Pastors might do well to consider resisting the urge to extemporize their entire prayer choosing rather to plan their prayers according to a general outline.¹⁷ The use of Scripture in prayer can also help to form our thoughts and direct our requests.

Prayer, like music, should be intelligible. The “catch phrases” of church life may be confusing to a church of newer believers, and may be blasé or trite to a church of mature believers. Thanking God for the “finished cross work of Christ” is an appropriate prayer, but may prove confusing to those who do not know what it means. While our prayers are not directed to people, but to God, our prayers are for people and thus should be intelligible to them so that they know what we are praying for and so that they can participate along with the person leading in prayer. Our wording should also be varied, so as to prevent vain repetition and to engage thoughtful participation.

Public prayer should be characterized by both reverence and boldness, rather than presumption, and should likely take a different nature than private prayer. The heart immersed in constant prayer throughout the day may breathe a sentence or two of “colloquial prayer” during a moment of thought. A corporate prayer should be less colloquial and personal, and in keeping with the corporate gathering of the church.

We may speak boldly with God, but still He is in heaven and we are upon earth, and we are to avoid presumption. In supplication we are peculiarly before the throne of the Infinite, and as the courtier in the king’s palace puts on another mien and another manner than that which he exhibits to his fellows courtiers, so should it be with us.¹⁸

We respond to God through giving.

An equally important part of the worship service is the time of corporate offering. The offering is giving back to God from what he has given to us. Its roots are found in the Old Testament worship of God as well as in the New Testament life of the church. 1 Chronicles 16:29 is an example of the Scriptures that show giving as a part of worship:

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name;
Bring an offering, and come before Him;
Worship the LORD in holy array.

¹⁷ See Derek Prime and Alistair Begg, *On Being a Pastor* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2004), pp. 211-216. On p. 214, Prime presents his own approach to outlining prayers.

¹⁸ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, p. 55

2 Corinthians 9:5-14 lays out some of the New Testament teaching on giving. While the offering described in 2 Corinthians 9 was a specific offering the needs of others saints, the general principles of giving can be derived from this passage. In this passage, Paul encourages the believers to give generously (vv. 2-6, 10-14), according to their personal pledge (v. 7), depending on God (v. 8), and from the heart because God loves a cheerful giver (v. 7). This giving then results in the needs of the saints being met and thanksgiving and glory to God (vv. 12-13). These principles, and others found in the New Testament, guide our worship of giving.

The offering should not be regarded as simply a time to raise the money needed to run the church, nor should it should become a time of brow-beating and manipulation. It is a time of worship during which the church body responds to God by giving to the body of Christ. The offering is taken, not with great fanfare, but with a sense of humble and thankful worship.

Many churches today have stopped taking a public offering, choosing instead to place offering boxes in various locations around the place where the church meets.¹⁹ This has the potential of robbing the people of God of the corporate worship of giving in unison. A church would be wise to consider ways in which they can make it clear that the offering is not for visitors, but for the people of the church, while stressing that participation in the offering is an act of grateful and obedient worship.

We respond to God through response to the message.

When the word of God is communicated whether through preaching, teaching, reading, or singing, worship is bound up in the appropriate response—the response of the spirit to the truth of God’s word. This response should not be separated from worship; it is a part of worship. When the word calls us to do something, we must respond in obedience.

The worship of preaching must make clear what the biblical response is to the truth that has been presented. It is not enough for the preacher to simply tell what God has said. He must also tell what God expects the hearer to do with what has been said. 1 Timothy 1:5 gives an example of what we might call Paul’s philosophy of preaching: “The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” Here, we see that Paul’s preaching is for the purpose of drawing forth love from inner change. In other words, Paul’s preaching was intent on changing lives from the inside out. The goal of preaching is not first to effect outer change. It must address the heart, the conscience, and the faith of the listener.

When such a call has been made, the unbeliever who may be present in worship can be exhorted to complete his first act of worship—confessing Christ as Lord and receiving the salvation that is found only in him. It is true that unbelievers cannot worship in the music.

¹⁹ Some have done this in order to not offend visitors who believe that “Churches just want your money.” Others have done this to maintain secrecy in giving, claiming Matthews 6:3-4 as a basis. Neither of these reasons seem convincing to this author.

However, they can worship God in the preaching by listening and responding to the call of God to salvation.

While evangelism is not a necessary part of the corporate worship, neither should it be regarded as an unbiblical part of corporate worship. When the church proclaims the truth of God in music and preaching, it is with a view of calling all men to a next right step from whatever place in life they are at. For the unbeliever, the next right step, indeed the only proper response, is calling on Christ for salvation. For the believer, the next right step may vary based on spiritual maturity and life context. The preaching of the Word must call people to take this step based on the message of the text.

Time should be given for this response, whether through time of silence, the selection of appropriate songs, or a public invitation to seek counsel and prayer with someone. The call for public response through “walking the aisle” is a matter which an individual church and pastor must decide. Such a public invitation is not a mandate of Scripture, and churches that do not have one are not disobedient. The practice may even vary from week to week. It would be wise for the preacher to announce the availability of an “inquiry room” or mature believers who are able to take time to talk with individuals about their personal questions or struggles with their faith or the claims of Christ on their life.

We respond to God through the ordinances.

Just as the ordinances are part of God speaking to us, so they are part of us responding to God. Through the ordinance of baptism, the new believer publicly confesses Christ as Lord along with his desire to unite with other believers in the local church in following Christ. Through the ordinance of communion, believers privately respond in confession, thankfulness, and praise to God for the sacrifice of Christ in our place. In so doing, we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26).

While baptism is a one-time response, communion is an on-going response that is a necessary part of the believer’s Christian walk. The church must stress the importance of the corporate observance of a remembrance of Christ’s death. The frequency or manner in which communion is observed may vary from church to church. A church may choose to observe communion in a special service, or as a part of the regular services. They may choose to observe it as open communion or closed communion. However, the obedience to the command to observe should not vary.

Summary

The response of the believer should be a glad and necessary response of obedience and submission to the message of God’s word proclaimed. These expressions of worship focus on the nature of worship in the corporate life of the church, but worship must not stop there. The corporate worship should be the natural extension of the life lived in worship of Christ. Corporate worship should, in turn, add fuel to the fire of constant personal worship.

Conclusion

Worship is a two way street, not in terms of the trading of worship, but in terms of the actual process of worship. Worship consists of a conversation between God and his people, where God speaks and the people respond. Worship is therefore first and foremost centered on the God who is being worshipped. It is simply wrong to focus worship on man, no matter how carefully we might disguise our “man-centeredness.” God and the truth about him and from him are to be the center of worship.

However, true worship cannot be inconsiderate of man because it does not simply consist in the speaking of God. It must also include the response of man. One has not truly worshipped until he has listened carefully to God through the reading of his word, the preaching of his word, and the singing of his truth and praise. One has not truly worshipped until he has responded from the heart to these things.

Through this conversation of worship, God can be honored by having his truth publicly and clearly proclaimed and by having people respond in glad submission through the work of Jesus Christ.