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Gather God's People

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BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

MINISTERS WHO DESIRE TO LEAD their congregations in God-honoring worship must lead with an understanding of the Bible's teaching on worship. A failure of theological leadership will leave God's people unanchored, carried about by every wind of human cunning (Ephesians 4:14). In matters of Christian worship, ministers who do not lead theologically hand over the role of leadership to passing cultural fads or venerated traditions. Our criticism of superficial, romanticized modern worship music, on the one hand, and of saccharin, sentimental classics, on the other hand, is shallow if we do not teach God's people the Bible's message about worship.

Within the pages of the Old and New Testaments, God has graciously met our need for a theological vision for worship. Through the Old Testament, Christians learn that God cares deeply how he is worshiped. In the New Testament, God explicitly teaches believers how he is to be worshiped. These two theological premises protect believers from worldly craftiness dictating the pace of Christian worship.

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Worship in the Old Testament

A reiterated theme of the Old Testament is God's regard for himself. He is committed steadfastly to his glory and honor and seeks to make himself known through the key Old Testament events of creation, exodus, exile, and the promise of a new covenant. God's devotion to the glory of his name provides a foundation for other Old Testament phenomena, including worship regulations in the law, penalties for violating these regulations, and the frequent commands for God's people to praise him.

The primary function of the created order is to testify to the creative excellence and skill of God. He designed creation to reveal his character and unveil specific attributes. As humans perceive the beauty of the dawn, dusk, and night sky, they perceive a visual witness of "the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1) and a declaration of the great Judge's "righteousness" (Psalm 50:6).

God's dealings with his people, the Israelites, also reflect his desire for glory. He created his covenant people and called them by his name for his own glory (Isaiah 43:7). His plan for this people, which he revealed to Abraham, involved bondage in and deliverance from Egypt (Genesis 15:12–16). The purpose of the extraordinary events of the exodus is to show the Egyptians the exclusive dominance of the God of Israel (Exodus 7:15; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29–30; 10:2; 14:4, 18).

Events throughout Old Testament history remind readers of God's intention of glorifying himself. Through extraordinary circumstances, the people of Israel enter the land God promised them. God causes the Jordan River to part, and the people cross the river on dry land. The purpose of this impres-

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sive display was that “all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful” (Joshua 4:24). Furthermore, God orchestrates Israel’s conquest and occupancy of the land in such a way that precludes Israel’s boasting and credits him duly for Israel’s victories (Joshua 6:16; Judges 7:2).

This theme—God’s intent to glorify himself—persists even as Israel rejects God. God grants wicked King Ahab a victory over Syria in order to reiterate to Ahab God’s character (1 Kings 20:13). For that same reason, the prophet Elijah confronted Ahab’s false prophets (1 Kings 18:36). However, Israel continues to rebel, and God brings about the curses of the law and sends his people away from the land promised to them. Israel’s exile and eventual return from exile share a common purpose. God exiles Israel because he “had concern” for his holy name (Ezekiel 36:21), and he extends mercy to exiled Israel for the sake of his holy name (Ezekiel 36:22).

God’s regard for himself and his desire for his own glory are traits that sometimes confuse believers. Any human with this kind of self-regard would face charges of narcissism. Yet, what makes the human pursuit of glory vapid is each human’s inherent imperfections. Not a single one of us deserves glory. God, however, in his exemplary holiness, radiant beauty, inscrutable wisdom, and scores of other perfect virtues, is worthy of all adulation, affection, and acceptance, and because he is omniscient, he knows his worthiness. Would we not think less of God if he thought less of himself?

Understanding God’s regard for himself and his glory clarifies the worship practices of the Old Testament. The phenomena of Old Testament worship orbit around the weighty

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truth of God's concern for his glory. The extensive worship regulations, for instance, find their ground and legitimation in God's desire for his own glory. Moses devotes six chapters of the book of Exodus (chapters 25–30) to the Lord's instructions regarding the design of a place for his worship. He later uses five chapters (chapters 36–40) to describe how Israelite craftsmen follow these instructions. This attention to detail communicates God's desire for his glory. He cares deeply about how he is worshiped.

God's commitment to his glory explains the severity of punishment that God levies against those who violate worship regulations. Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, conducted priestly worship outside of God's guidelines. They provided an offering that was contrary to God's command (Leviticus 10:1). Tragically, Nadab and Abihu die "before the LORD" because of this sin (verse 2). God earnestly seeks the worship of his name, but he wills this worship to conform to his standards. The severity of this particular judgment communicates the extent to which God cares about his glory in worship.

The prevalence of calls to worship in the Old Testament makes sense in light of God's passion for his fame. Particularly in the book of Psalms, God frequently commands his people, and even all peoples, to praise him. Over thirty times, we receive the command, "Praise the LORD," and the psalmists use many other imperatives, including "Ascribe to the LORD . . ." (Psalm 29:2), "let us bow down in worship" (95:6), and "Sing to the LORD" (149:1). With these entreaties, God is not fishing for compliments, lacking confidence, or seeking assurance. These commands are decrees from a Judge who preserves

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justice. One being in all the universe deserves all glory and all praise; therefore, “Praise the LORD!”

In the way God has created the world, treated his people, commanded his praise, intricately specified worship practices, and judged the disobedient, he has sought his fame, glory, and honor. The Old Testament, then, reveals to us God, who cares deeply for how he is worshiped.

Worship in the New Testament

The God who deeply cares how he is worshiped—as revealed in the Old Testament—is the God who takes great care to teach Christians how to worship in the New Testament. The nature of Christian worship, as well as the activities of Christian worship, are explicitly set forth in the gospels and in the epistles of Paul.

Christian worship is spiritual and truthful. As Jesus dialogues with a sinful Samaritan woman, their views on worship begin to contrast with one another. She is preoccupied with matters of genealogy and geography. The right lineage (“our father Jacob,” John 4:12) and locale (“our ancestors worshiped on this mountain,” John 4:20) are the criteria she emphasizes for right worship. However, Jesus contests these notions and twice points to “spirit” and “truth” as the standards for God-honoring worship (John 4:23–24 ESV). Worshiping in “spirit” implies that proper praise involves the affections, the emotions, the desires, and the will. No longer does worship primarily revolve around physical acts, such as animal sacrifices. Worshiping in “truth” centralizes praise in Jesus Christ. He is the one who provides access to God the Father (Ephesians 2:18).

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Apart from Jesus Christ—and the truthful good news about his deity, incarnation, death, resurrection, and second coming—worship lacks credibility and truthfulness.

Christian worship is purposeful. The apostle Paul operates from this principle as he instructs the church at Corinth about worship. In corporate worship, Paul in his own practice sought to sing with his mind (his understanding) and his spirit (1 Corinthians 14:15). This means Christian worship is not a freewheeling experience that concerns itself only with emotive, spontaneous responses. Christian worship is equally an intellectual enterprise—one in which believers acknowledge, confess, and profess propositional truth. By engaging the mind and the spirit in worship, Christians edify one another and testify to the truth before unbelievers. By purposefully addressing mind and spirit, Christians imitate God, who is not a “God of disorder” (1 Corinthians 14:33), and they do all things “in a fitting and orderly way” (verse 40).

Christian worship is congregational. The New Testament in pattern and precept defines worship in the context of the local church. The early post-Pentecost church gathered frequently to receive teaching, participate in the Lord's Supper, and pray (Acts 2:42). Though the number of believers in Jerusalem was significant (three thousand, according to Acts 2:41), the congregation still gathered in unison, though doing so required a large public venue (Solomon's Colonnade, Acts 5:12). New Testament commands for worship often imply the participation of the entire local congregation. For instance, the commands to sing to one another (Ephesians 5:18–21; Colossians 3:15–16) involve the whole congregation in encouraging one another.

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The New Testament often includes commands that indicate what God expects to occur in Christian worship. An expectation for all Christians is to regularly gather for worship (Hebrews 10:25). These gatherings are the context for gospel ministers to fulfill their charge of preaching God's word (Acts 6:4; 2 Timothy 4:1–2). The New Testament depicts and expects churches to have an active corporate prayer life, which includes supplications for other believers (James 5:14), ministers (Colossians 4:3), and civil authorities (1 Timothy 2:1–2). Churches are commanded to sing when they gather (Ephesians 5:18–21; Colossians 3:15–16). The reading of God's word is a command repeated in the New Testament (Colossians 4:16; 1 Timothy 4:13). The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper form an important part of the church's gathering, with the former constituting the mission of the church (Matthew 28:19–20) and the latter enduring until Christ's return (1 Corinthians 11:26). All of these commands ought to inform and shape the worship practices of local churches. God has carefully taught believers how to worship when they gather together.

Applying a Biblical Theology of Worship

A summary of the Old Testament's teaching on worship is that God cares deeply how he is worshiped, and a summary of the New Testament's teaching on worship is that God has specifically instructed believers on how to worship him. Christian ministers must understand and apply these principles as they oversee their local congregations. These principles give church leaders the theological vision needed for planning and leading worship.

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These two summary statements cohere well with one another. If God cares deeply how he is worshiped and if God has given us specific instructions on worshiping him, then Christians ought to prioritize these commands in their worship. When churches gather, the preaching and reading of God's word, corporate prayer, congregational singing, and practice of the ordinances are essential. These practices are the means God has devised and ordained for glorifying himself in the local church. The right use of these means in the church's worship strengthens believers. Furthermore, intentional, orderly worship best communicates the gospel to unbelievers who have gathered with the congregation (1 Corinthians 14:23–26).

A wise way for applying these biblical principles and prioritizing these commands is what has often been called the regulative principle. God's word gives us precise parameters for worship. The New Testament, in particular, regulates worship. What it commands Christians to do in their gatherings ought to be the substance and sum of congregational worship. Whatever else creative Christians propose for worship lacks warrant in God's word. Though these proposals may have benefit in certain contexts, they are out of place in worship gatherings of the church. God is eager for his glory; he would not leave any essentials for the worship of his name unrevealed.

The following chapters guide ministers in understanding and applying the elements of Christian worship that are demanded by God's word. Much of the material provides practical guidance on planning and leading worship. However, before any of these suggestions are adopted by ministers

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and embraced by local churches, the theological concepts of God's devotion to his glory and his meticulous commands for worship must be affirmed. Pastors, love these doctrines from God's word and teach your congregation to love them also. Only in this doctrinally rich context will the application of these principles flourish.

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A HELPFUL ARTICULATION of the regulative principle, which has been offered by authors such as Mark Dever, Paul Alexander, and Ligon Duncan, is to preach the Bible, read the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible.¹ Describing Christian worship in this way allows God’s authoritative and inspired word to shape the form and content of worship. In the following sections, we provide a biblical description of these elements, articulate the benefits of these elements, and give some suggestions on the format of these elements.

Preach the Word

God has ordained the preaching of his word as the essential means for conversion. This belief was so basic for the apostle Paul that he questioned how unbelievers would become Christians “without someone preaching” (Romans 10:14). God’s word is useful for the full range of Christian ministry, including teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training (2 Timothy 3:16). Since God’s word has this kind of usefulness, the Christian minister must “preach the word” (2 Timothy 4:2). The local church has always been the place for people who devote themselves to receiving the teaching of God’s word (Acts 2:42).

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The importance of preaching should have a foundational impact on the planning of worship. Local church leaders must not detract from the importance of preaching in attitude, deed, or word. Sometimes a pastor commends the worship accompanists with this kind of jest: “That music was so great; I think we could all go home after that.” Another common attitude is to equate worship primarily with music, as though worship ends with the song before the sermon and resumes with the song after the sermon. However, because God’s word is useful and because preaching unleashes the profitability of God’s word, the preaching of God’s word is truly the highlight of the local church’s weekly gathering.

A practical way to portray the importance of preaching is to plan worship elements in a way that supports the sermon. In our worship planning, the Scripture readings, songs, and prayers all take their cue from the sermon. Those planning worship read the upcoming sermon texts throughout the week, along with sermon outlines. Worship planners can use keywords and central themes from sermon texts and outlines to identify songs and Scripture readings that cohere with the message of the sermon. All the service elements prepare the congregation to receive God’s word with the intended result that the preached word will set the pace for the congregation’s discipleship throughout the week.

A team approach is also helpful in worship planning. When the one who will preach participates in planning, he is able to give insights on anticipated points of application, songs that fit the meaning of the message, prayer issues that relate to the sermon’s topic matter, and Scripture passages that are relevant to the sermon’s content. However, the preaching

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pastor should not be the only one planning worship. In that scenario, the church's worship can often align too closely to the pastor's preferences, leading to an undue repetition of readings and songs. Having an additional planner, particularly one who is attuned to the church's music capacity and traditions, will enrich the planning process.

Together, we plan our church's worship services nearly every week of the year. Brian is the senior pastor of our congregation and in this role serves as the primary preaching pastor. Jason is Brian's pastoral assistant, and his duties include regularly planning and leading the music in the worship gatherings. The two of us meet midweek to plan, and we each prepare for this planning session. Brian develops his sermon outline and makes note of any particularly apt song or Scripture selections. Jason prepares service suggestions based on the text and Brian's outline. These preparations make the planning more efficient; we rarely waste time briskly flipping through a hymnal hoping to find the right song. Even if we discard our prepared suggestions, we are closer to a plan than if we had come to the meeting without having done thoughtful reflection.

An example of our planning process shows how two leaders can collaborate to plan a sermon-serving worship gathering. For a recent service, Brian planned to preach 1 Corinthians 9:1–18 under the title "Freed to Preach the Gospel." Brian used the apostle Paul's example to exhort believers to preach the gospel regardless of who you are (verses 1–14) and regardless of what you gain (verses 15–18). The outline and the sermon text have a strong emphasis on evangelism.

Early in the week, Jason prepared suggestions for the service. This pattern represents our church's typical Sunday

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morning service, which lasts approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. All hymn numbers represent entries in the 1991 edition of the *Baptist Hymnal*.

Announcements and Welcome

Call to Worship: Psalm 150 (with opening word of prayer)

Hymn 27: “All Creatures of Our God and King”

Hymn 204: “Glorious Is Thy Name”

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 52:7 – 10

Pastoral Prayer

Hymn (inserted in bulletin): “Christ, for the World
We Sing”

Hymn (inserted in bulletin): “All I Have Is Christ”

Offertory Prayer

Offertory Music: Psalm 105:1 – 4, set to tune of “It Came
Upon the Midnight Clear,” led by accompanists and
vocalists for the congregation to listen to

Ministry of the Word

Hymn 604: “Come, All Christians, Be Committed”

Moment of Silent Reflection

Closing Prayer

Benediction: Psalm 72:18 – 19

The opening sequence of reading and songs (Psalm 150, Hymn 27, and Hymn 204) gives a foundation for Brian’s first sermon point (i.e., “preach the gospel regardless of who you are”). Psalm 150 emphatically commands everything with breath to praise God. Hymn 27 restates that imperative and applies it directly to humanity (“all ye men . . . take your part”). Hymn 204 provides a corporate tone to the task of declaring

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God's praises: "Blessed Savior, we adore Thee; we Thy love and grace proclaim."

The next section of the order of worship (Isaiah 52:7–10, Pastoral Prayer, "Christ, for the World We Sing," and "All I Have Is Christ") adds a layer of richness to the theme of evangelism. In hearing Isaiah 52 read, the church is reminded that the Christian act of evangelism is foretold in the Old Testament and described as a beautiful act of service.

A service leader delivers the pastoral prayer, which includes petitions for a number of needs specific to our congregation. This prayer also has an emphasis on our evangelistic faithfulness and fervor.

The next two suggested songs contribute to the evangelistic theme. "Christ, for the World We Sing" is a theologically rich hymn from the *Trinity Hymnal* (#447) and is set to a tune our church recognizes from another song ("Come, Thou Almighty King"). The song fits well with the second point of Brian's sermon (i.e., "preach the gospel regardless of what you gain") by reminding Christians of the "work," "reproach," and "cross to bear" in missions.

"All I Have Is Christ" is a modern hymn that our church enthusiastically enjoys. It connects with the service through a prayerful line, "Use my ransomed life in any way you choose," and contributes a clear articulation of the gospel.

Our offertory prayer and music provide a final moment of preparation and reflection before the sermon. A common practice in our church is listening to a psalm set to a familiar tune. In this instance, Psalm 105 sustains the evangelism focus with its commands to "make known among the nations what he has done" (verse 1) and to "tell of all his wonderful acts" (verse 2).

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The song suggested for after the sermon—“Come, All Christians, Be Committed”—is an action-oriented hymn that promotes Christian service. In our typical fashion, we plan a moment to reflect on the service and sermon, a final prayer, and a closing benediction, which is a final pronouncement from God’s word. This particular benediction is a prayer that “the whole earth be filled with his glory” (Psalm 72:19).

When we met to plan this particular service, we kept many of these suggestions. We made one change by replacing “Come, All Christians, Be Committed” with the hymn “Soldiers of Christ, in Truth Arrayed” (Hymn 574), which has a stronger evangelism focus than the suggested hymn of response.

The primary advantage of this method of planning is working to ensure that the other worship elements support the preaching of God’s word. The proposition of the sermon becomes the pulse for the entire time of worship. The congregation leaves the gathering with a clear sense of the pastor’s word-derived counsel for the week ahead.

Read the Word

In many churches, the sermon provides the only moments when God’s people hear God’s word. However, the New Testament, and specifically the apostle Paul, envisions God’s word audibly present throughout Christian worship. Paul commands his protégé, Timothy, to devote himself to “the public reading of Scripture” (1 Timothy 4:13). Interestingly, he gave the command for his letters to receive a similar public audience (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27). Since God’s word is useful (2 Timothy 3:16), then the reading of Spirit-inspired Scripture from both the Old and New Testaments benefits God’s people.

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Church leaders should, therefore, incorporate the public reading of God's word in their worship gatherings. The public reading of Scripture can play several roles in the worship service. Through a call to worship, a church leader can read God's word near the beginning of a service to elicit the attention and participation of worshipers. The psalms and other praise-oriented passages—for example, the songs of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10), Mary (Luke 1:46–55), and the heavenly hosts (Revelation 5:9–14; 15:3–4)—exemplify the attitudes, emotions, and thoughts that Christians should have in worship. An appropriate opening passage also introduces key themes that will reoccur throughout the time of worship.

Additional Scripture readings can bring great value to the worship service. Often, a text from a different genre or section of Scripture brings clarity or detail to the sermon passage. For example, if a sermon passage from the New Testament quotes extensively from an Old Testament passage, reading the Old Testament text at some point in the service will allow the preacher to refer to that other text throughout his sermon. Some passages, ranging from the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17) to prophets' indictments of Israel (Isaiah 1:10–20) to New Testament descriptions of sin (1 John 1:5–10), are particularly effective in preparing the congregation to confess sin. Some passages facilitate times of corporate prayer by modeling prayer (Matthew 6:9–13), commanding prayer (1 Timothy 2:1–2), or showing the effectiveness of prayer (James 5:16–18). Texts that display Christian doctrine in clear and powerful ways, such as John's discussion of the eternality and incarnation of Christ (John 1:1–14) or Paul's definition of the gospel

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(1 Corinthians 15:1–8), remind believers of key truths that they must hold to in order to persevere in their faith (1 Corinthians 15:2; 1 Timothy 4:16).

In our service planning, we share a biblical conviction for varying the genre of Scripture readings. A general principle is to choose Scripture readings from the Testament that is not being preached. On occasion, our Scripture readings are from the same Testament as the sermon, but we select a reading from a different genre (e.g., a Scripture reading from the gospels, when the sermon is from the epistles). Varying the readings conveys a confidence in all of God’s word as inspired and useful (2 Timothy 3:16). Furthermore, this practice follows the example of our Savior, who articulated the biblical basis of his life, death, and resurrection with a cross section of Old Testament references (Luke 24:44, “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms”).

A benediction is an appropriate way to end a worship service. Using a short passage of Scripture, a minister dismisses God’s people with one final exhortation. The benediction is not a mystical conduit for blessings; instead, it is another strategy for communicating the importance of God’s word and emphasizing themes from the sermon and service. Your church’s traditional hymnal may have a list of scriptural benedictions, as the *Baptist Hymnal* does (#722). Some of our favorite selections include the following passages.

- “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his countenance toward you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24–26).

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This passage conveys to believers hope and the assurance of God's presence.

- “Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen” (Psalm 72:18–19).

When we specifically aim to make God's people zealous for his glory, we find this reading an inspiring ending to the service.

- “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:5–6).

This Pauline prayer punctuates services that emphasize Christian unity.

- “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14).

This succinct reading that affirms the doctrine of the Trinity and speaks of fundamental Christian experiences (e.g., “grace,” “love,” and “fellowship”) is a fitting conclusion to any worship service.

- “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24).

For sermons and services that focus on Christian

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sanctification, this benediction sustains that focus, while reminding God's people of his faithfulness.

- “May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance” (2 Thessalonians 3:5).

When the preached word summons believers to endure trials, this benediction provides a simple, strongly worded prayer.

- “Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (Hebrews 13:20–21).

This reading fittingly concludes services exulting in the work of Christ on the cross, specifically after the worshipers have celebrated the Lord's Supper.

Pray the Word

Corporate prayer finds both its charge and content in God's word. The commands and examples of Scripture give believers a full agenda for prayer, and the public gathering is an apt time and place for practicing the discipline of prayer. Basic human needs, such as the provision of food (Matthew 6:11) and good health (3 John 2), should be matters of prayer. Christians pray for the conversion and salvation of others (Romans 10:1). Other believers and their growth in godliness are high priorities for prayer, as the apostle Paul shows when he prays for Christians' unity (Romans 15:5–6); hope, joy, and peace (Romans 15:13);

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experience of grace (1 Corinthians 16:23); wisdom, revelation, and knowledge (Ephesians 1:16–17); increased love and spiritual fruit (Philippians 1:9–11); and endurance and patience (Colossians 1:11–12). When fellow believers suffer crises, such as threatening illnesses, Christians pray for them (James 5:14–15). God's people confess their sins to each other (James 5:16) and, through prayer, to God (Daniel 9:4–5).

Christian ministers greatly need the prayers of those in their charge and of likeminded believers in other congregations. The apostle Paul's frequent prayer requests are a good guide in praying for gospel ministers. Christians should pray for ministers to have boldness in declaring the gospel (Ephesians 6:18–19), opportunities to declare Christ (Colossians 4:2), favorable reception of their messages (2 Thessalonians 3:1), and deliverance from persecutors (2 Thessalonians 3:2). Christians are admonished to pray for authorities, specifically that their leadership will allow Christians to live lives that are "peaceful and quiet" (1 Timothy 2:1–2).

The local gathering represents an occasion for obeying these commands. More importantly, neglecting the practice of corporate prayer stands in violation of God's word (1 Timothy 2:8). Since the calling of ministry entails a devotion to prayer (Acts 6:4), pastors must lead their congregations to embrace corporate prayer. Each local church should have a pastor-led, congregation-supported strategy for corporate prayer that includes times for focused and extended prayer. Each formal public gathering of God's people must have a time of prayer.

A wise consideration is to vary the approach to prayer in these gatherings. For example, if a church has several gather-

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ings a week (e.g., a Sunday morning service, Sunday evening service, Wednesday night service), the time and type of prayer can vary in these services. At our church, a pastor leads prayers during the morning service, using his awareness of the congregation's needs to inform his prayer. During the evening service, in an extended prayer time, a pastor gives the congregation details on matters of prayer and members are called on to pray. In our Wednesday night setting, members mention prayer requests, and volunteers pray for categories of requests. This variety benefits our congregation in many ways. Our services and the intentionality in our prayer strategy communicate the importance and necessity of prayer. Members know they are being prayed for. Pastor-led prayers give members examples to follow in their own private and public prayers. Having opportunities to pray publically helps members feel involved in the life of our church. Congregations can vary their approach to corporate prayer based on a number of factors (e.g., size, maturity of members), but they must not neglect this discipline.

A part of our prayer strategy is a focused, pastor-led prayer during the morning service. The focus of the prayer depends on the themes of the sermon and service. The most common focused prayer times are pastoral prayers and prayers of confession. A pastoral prayer addresses ongoing pressing needs of the congregation. Requests often relate to basic needs, health concerns, family changes (e.g., marriages, births), and particularly difficult trials. A prayer of confession — often planned when sermons have extensive applications related to obedience and sanctification — addresses sinful attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and emotions. The praying pastor describes specific sins,

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pleads for God's forgiveness, and reflects on the gospel's power and victory over these sins. Other focused, pastor-led prayers have included prayers dedicated to the persecuted church, the unconverted, and civil authorities. These themes emerged because of their relevance to content of the sermon and the biblical warrant for praying through these issues.

Sing the Word

As with prayer, Scripture insists on and informs congregational singing. Church leaders can look to a variety of sources for guidance in their worship ministries—blogs, conferences, magazines, and popular contemporary Christian music. Before leaders consider the advice of these sources, they need a framework for the Bible's instructions on congregational singing. All of a church's decisions on song selection and styles must pass through this filter. Biblical faithfulness is the single most important criterion for church leaders to consider.

A seminal text on congregational singing is Ephesians 5:19. This admonishment was clearly an important part of Paul's vision for the local church because he repeats the same encouragement to the church at Colossae (Colossians 3:16). In the context of Ephesians 5, Paul's instruction regarding congregational singing fills out his charge to the Ephesians that they should live wisely and watch their walk (Ephesians 5:15). Specifically, verse 19 gives detail to the command "be filled with the Spirit" (verse 18). Paul envisions believers "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" (verse 19 ESV).

This text teaches about the audience of corporate worship.

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An often repeated and well-meaning worship cliché is that worship has one audience, God. However, Paul identifies two audiences. Congregational singing has vertical and horizontal dimensions. On the one hand, Christians direct their singing upward to God, “making melody to the Lord.” Yet, Christians also sing outward to each other; they address one another “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” In subsequent chapters, we will apply this dual-audience concept to a variety of issues, including selecting songs and leading singing. Before all the practical decisions, though, come the understanding and acceptance that Christian worship is a vehicle for mutual edification instead of simply being an insular, emotional connection with God. As Christians sing, they address each other, reminding one another of their commonly held truths in order to spur one another on in a wise, Spirit-filled, God-honoring walk with the Lord.

The text provides insight into the content of congregational singing. The apostle Paul describes it as “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” Interestingly, Paul would have the Ephesians sing Scripture, specifically, the Old Testament psalms. Though “psalms” had a broad use in the Greco-Roman world, early Christians most likely understood Paul to refer to the psalms of the Old Testament. Early church figures, such as Tertullian, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius, Augustine, Jerome, and Saint Sidonius Apollinaris, make reference to the practice of Old Testament psalm singing in the early church.² Paul’s words, here in Ephesians 5, demand that the God-breathed expressions of praise from the book of Psalms make their way into churches’ repertoires of songs. For guidance on

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introducing psalm singing to your church, see appendix 1, “Reintroducing Psalm Singing.”

Paul does not impose on Christians the command to sing psalms *exclusively*. His reference to “hymns and spiritual songs” legitimizes other musical expressions of the church’s doctrine. Paul obeyed his own command to make use of other kinds of songs. In a few instances, Paul cites early Christian poetry—perhaps the vestiges of early Christian hymnody—in his teaching (Philippians 2:5–11; 2 Timothy 2:11–13). Furthermore, the worship scenes in Revelation show God’s people singing new songs and texts not found elsewhere in Scripture (Revelation 4:11; 5:9–10; 19:6–8). To demand that only Old Testament psalms be sung in the gatherings of the church is a misconstruction of Paul’s words in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 and the broader example of the New Testament. However, “hymns and spiritual songs” does not provide carte blanche for church leaders to import just anything into their music rotation. Recall that Paul’s hymn citations fit rather seamlessly alongside Scripture. “Hymns and spiritual songs” are biblical in their content. They should articulate Christian doctrines and elicit expressly Christian virtues, especially considering that Christians address them to one another for the purpose of encouragement.

These principles—that congregational singing has a dual audience and that congregational singing is biblical in its content—constitute a cease-fire directive for the “worship wars.” Congregations that cast a suspicious eye toward contemporary spiritual songs without first examining their content have not grasped the dual-audience concept. A similar problem persists

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among those congregations that cast off traditional hymns as antiquated. Both of these worship warriors have an audience of one—themselves. Seeing mutual edification as a purpose of congregational singing and considering others more important than ourselves should lead Christians in multigenerational churches to sing with gladness a range of songs and styles.

A multitude of historic hymns are well suited for honoring God and encouraging other believers. Similarly, an increasing number of contemporary spiritual songs or “modern hymns,” as we call them, are equally well suited for these tasks. Each church needs to exercise wisdom in balancing the benefits of a multigenerational hymnody. Our congregation, which includes a significant percentage of members who are accustomed to historic hymns, approaches the issue by singing songs with good content from a trustworthy hymnal and supplementing doctrinally rich and easily learned modern hymns. This method has contributed to a healthy worship environment for a church made up of people from multiple cultures and generations.

See the Word

The ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are important elements of Christian worship.* These two practices were instituted under the divine authority of Jesus Christ. The

*Throughout this book, we discuss the ordinances from our perspective and tradition. We recognize that some readers have different views on the meaning and modes of these ordinances, as well as on who are the proper recipients of these ordinances. Instead of attempting to persuade readers of our convictions, we encourage readers to consider our recommendations in the context of their own views.

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Christian ordinance of baptism is part of the enduring mission of the church (Matthew 28:18–20). After unbelievers are converted to Christ, they receive the ordinance of baptism from a local congregation of believers by being submerged in water and raised out of it. Baptism is deeply symbolic of conversion, salvation, and union with Christ (Romans 6:1–4). Thus, the practice depicts to all who see it that sinful humans can receive the benefits of Christ's death and anticipate the glory of a resurrection that is like Christ's own.

Similarly, Jesus Christ instituted the Lord's Supper and expected that Christians would repeat the practice throughout the ages (1 Corinthians 11:23–26). Christians participate in the Lord's Supper by eating bread and drinking juice from a cup. These elements are wonderfully symbolic of Christ's death for sins. Just as Christ broke the bread and distributed it at the first Lord's Supper, so he also freely gave of his body for the benefit of those who believe. As one pours a drink into his mouth from a cup, so also Christ poured out his blood to achieve the forgiveness of sins. When congregations partake of the Lord's Supper, they strikingly “proclaim the Lord's death” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Ministers must administer these ordinances in worshipful ways. They should exhaustively teach about the ordinances in their preaching ministries and briefly summarize the meaning of the ordinances when administering them. The congregation should know in advance that the ordinances will be administered so they can thoughtfully prepare. The significance of the ordinances deserves emphasis and protection. One way of protecting the ordinances' significance is by prohibiting pri-

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vate participation in the ordinances. Since baptism and the Lord's Supper visually remind Christians of the gospel and conversion, the whole congregation should experience these worshipful moments together. A baptism is too edifying and meaningful for a pool at youth camp; let the whole congregation receive the visual encouragement of a young soul that has passed from death to life! Another prudent protection is to limit the role of the visual arts in worship. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the visual depictions of the Christian faith that God has explicitly ordained. Certainly, expressions of dramatic and visual arts are often beautiful and soul nourishing, but their presence in congregational worship gatherings can be duplicative and distracting.

Conclusion

These practices are the central elements of worship: the preaching of God's word, the public reading of God's word, praying in accordance with God's word, singing what coheres with God's word, and seeing God's word through the ordinances. God has graciously blessed his people by taking great care to teach them how to glorify him in worship. He has told us not only what to do in worship but also how to do it. In Christian worship, as with all aspects of the Christian life, may we learn to "not go beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6).