

## Worship—Seeing God Rightly and Savoring God Truly

Tom Gibbs

**Objective:** It is our aim in this lesson to rightly understand what God intends corporate worship to be. We also aim to understand the various sides of the debate. Finally, our aim is to understand and embrace Redeemer's particular expression of corporate worship.

### I. Introduction

"Our whole being by its very nature is one vast need: incomplete, preparatory, empty yet cluttered, crying out for Him who can untie things that are now knotted together and tie up things that are dangling loose." (C.S. Lewis quoted by T. Longman in Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind, p. 174.)

And at the core of that "needy self" is a worshipping heart. You might think about this way: The most religious thing you may do is go to the gym or watch TV or go to work. Worship is not just what human's do; it is what human's do because of the "hole" in their hearts. St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." He was simply saying that we were created to glorify and enjoy God. Our tendency, however, is to look elsewhere for our joy and happiness.

Christian worship recaptures that impulse and seeks to turn us away from the trivial and artificial objects of worship which captivate our hearts and return us to the person of true worship—The Living God.

But, how do we begin a talk about worship when people are so divided?

- ❖ Worship Wars: Contemporary, Liturgical and Traditional
- ❖ Culture Wars: High, Folk and Popular
- ❖ Evangelistic Wars: Worship is for Believers, Church as Missionary Outpost for Seekers
- ❖ Individuals and Corporate Concerns
- ❖ Structured order and Free-flowing Forms

Where does it stop?

First and foremost we need to realize that the heart of THE ISSUE regarding worship is no longer being discussed:

### THE ISSUE IN WORSHIP: GOD Seeing God Rightly and Savoring God Truly

Worship is not about performing a style, embracing a culture, satisfying individuals, creating a mood, sentimental emotions or being popular.

### II. Seeing God Rightly: The Centrality of God

Worship must begin and end with God. If we get God wrong, we get all of worship wrong. We take it as an assumption that we understand God only according to the Scriptures.

The issue is this: Who is worship for, us or God?

God is the first priority of the church. Not people. Not ministry. Not growth. Not success. God and God alone occupies the place of ultimate and absolute priority in the church...From our preaching, our writing, and our lifestyle, it would appear that today's church is preoccupied with other matters. ...The great need of the church today is neither to cling to the old or to create the new forms and formats. Our greatest need today is to recover the priority of God in our worship and in the whole of life. Bruce H. Leafblad (Worship 101: Recovering the Priority of God)

If we aim for our satisfaction in worship, then both God and we will not be satisfied. But if we aim for God's satisfaction in worship then we'll both be satisfied. Skip Ryan

Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Shorter Catechism #1

If it is fundamentally about God, then we need to begin with an understanding of who he is, first and foremost. My feelings, my experience, what I get out of worship, etc. all become secondary issues. While important they are not central.

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the heart of the contrite. Isaiah 57:15

- A. Transcendence: God is a Transcendent Person. He is not like us—"wholly other."
- B. Imminence: God is an Imminent Person. He has initiated relationship with us and invites us into relationship with him.

Seeing God truly is tricky due to nature of his character. While the transcendence and imminence of God don't exist in tension in God, they must exist in a dynamic tension in our services of worship if we are to communicate his character. If we emphasize one without the other our view of God falls out of balance.

For example:

- Transcendence w/o imminence: God becomes distant, uninvolved and I am no longer accountable to him. This is common in our mainline traditions. There may be powerful symbols and architecture, but the presence of God and movement of God is no longer there. Prayers and preaching are void of power. There is no sense that God is "among us."
- Imminence w/o transcendence: God become so close that he is no longer revered. Instead, he has become my "buddy", "friend", "boyfriend", etc. Worship becomes sentimental, hokey and trivial. While focusing on the God who loves them; the great cost of that love (sacrifice) and the distant traveled (holiness) has been lost.

### III. Savoring God Truly: The Centrality of the Heart:

Worship is at the core of our humanity. Our problem in worship is not, though, our humanity, nor is it the created order. The Bible instructs us to find our joy and happiness and life alone in the one, true God.

Whom have in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Psalm 73:25-26

Yet, our tendency, indeed attraction, is to look for that "life" elsewhere. The Bible calls this "idolatry."

As G.K. Chesterton said, "Even the man knocking at the door of the brothel is looking for God."

- A. Exposing Hearts
  - Idol Factories:

Idols are those things upon which we set our affections with the hope that they will bring us life. We think we need these things in order to live, be happy, etc. Of course there are the obvious things that people obsess about: the fleshly appetites: food, drugs, sex and alcohol. But we also obsess about other things which we think will bring us happiness: money, careers, approval, achievements, power and relationships. Our hearts turn on all of these things. And, while they are fine in their proper sphere, when they become the object of our eternal affection, they just cannot produce. Of course, we all struggle with idols.

Ironically, it is not that we desire too much, but that we desire too much from the wrong things.

*...it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. (C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], pp.1-2.)*

- Religious Pretension:

Thieves of the Gospel can be active in Worship. This is “sanctified” idolatry.

- Legalism: The guilty conscience is absolved or a prideful conscience is nurtured by: going to church more, giving money, confessing one’s sins, generating a feeling or learning more truth
- Relativism: The unconcerned or just barely concerned conscience is absolved by: sentimental music, an aesthetic experience, having attended or a nostalgic moment

## B. Renewing Hearts

- Savoring Christ for us in the Gospel:

Worship is the renewal of the Gospel in our hearts for both Christians and non-Christians. The question is what can rescue a sin-burdened heart. There is only one thing: The Gospel message. It is the only message in the world distinct from the world’s message. The world says do something, experience something, learn something and build a record through which you can stand before God and gain his approval. The Gospel says that Christ built a record for us so that we can stand before God and receive his approval. When the Gospel is washing over your heart, you will worship.

Amazingly, we cannot give God his due, see Him rightly, see Him for what He is worth, unless we first receive His great Worth. Worship is for the glory of God, but I will not be a worshipper unless I first and foremost receive what God gives in worship—Himself. That is why the gospel is so important. Worship is for God, but unless I receive the Gospel I will never worship.

The work of worship is to renew us to the engine of grace by embracing Jesus.

- Savoring Christ with All of Who we Are:

Good worship engages the mind, emotions and will:

The mind must be engaged with sound doctrine. Otherwise, we will not see God rightly and worship something other than the true God. Yet, if we only engage the mind, there will only be an intellectual exercise. Preaching is not a lecture. The light of truth must warm our hearts. We need both LIGHT and HEAT. Only in engaging both the mind and the emotions can the will be effectively turned.

#### IV. What It's Going to Take for US to Worship Well!<sup>1</sup>

##### A. A Few Words about Liturgy:

The word liturgy comes from the Latin word *leitourgia* which simply means service. It came to be known as the order or form which characterized the divine "service" of worship.

...every church has some kind of order or pattern in worship, and every life has some kind of ritual. There is always a certain pattern that, when followed, creates a sense of comfort and a sense of memory, the "way we've always done it."

We crave predictability and regularity, especially in the significant passages of life when the changes seem overwhelming. When we shrink back from the dynamic holiness and presence of God, ritual can help us encounter the mystery of God without being lost in it. Ritual helps to make sense and order out of what feels disordered and out of control. Sometimes encounters with God lead us to the brink or a breaking point, and ritual functions as a safety net. John Throop

- Every Church Performs a Liturgy: Every church—whether the forms are free-flowing and determined by the pastor or if the structure is rigidly determined by a book of worship—worships using a liturgy. The question is not do you have a liturgy, but what is your liturgy and does it effectively lead and enable the congregation to worship.
- Liturgy Harnesses the Corporate Event of Worship: Like a team of horses harnessed together pulling a carriage, the liturgy harnesses the harvest of hearts reaped by the Gospel for corporate worship. In other words, corporate worship is most exciting, enjoyable and powerful when those gathered have been awakened by the Gospel and have sensed the greatness and intimacy of God at the same time. The liturgy is that

<sup>1</sup> None of the ideas contained in this section are original to the author; they are simply distilled reflections. For a fuller treatment please consult: Tim Keller, "Evangelistic Worship," [www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/evangelisticworship.pdf](http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/evangelisticworship.pdf), "What It Takes To Worship Well: An interview with Tim Keller," *Leadership*, (Spring 1994). John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1986), *The Pleasures of God*, (Portland, Multnomah Press, 1991). Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), "Why a Liturgical Way of Worshipping God?," [www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.liturgy.html](http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.liturgy.html), Robert Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994). Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for Turn-of-the-Century Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). John Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship*, (Phillipsburg, P&R, 1996), *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg, P&R, 1997). John Throop "Ending the Worship Wars!," [www.ccli.com/WorshipResources/Articles.cfm?itemID=14](http://www.ccli.com/WorshipResources/Articles.cfm?itemID=14). Terry Johnson, *Leading in Worship*, (Oak Ridge: The Covenant Foundation, 1996), "Liturgical Studies," *Westminster Theological Journal* 60:1 (Spring 1998), pp. 131-152. Calvin Johannsen, *Music & Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998). Leonard Payton, "Getting 'Blessed': By Grace or By Works," *Modern Reformation*, (January/February 1996), "Reaching Unchurched Heinrich and Marie," *Modern Reformation*, (January/February, 1997), "How Shall We Sing to God?" in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to the Authority of Scripture and the Gospel*, John H. Armstrong, gen. ed., (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996). Skip Ryan "Worship," an unpublished paper. D. G. Hart, "It May Be Refreshing, But Is It Reformed?," *Calvin Theological Journal*, 32 (1997), pp. 407-423, Robert Rayburn, "Liturgical Reform: The Practical Problems," delivered to the Pre-General Assembly Reformed Liturgy Conference of the Presbyterian Church in America, Dallas, TX, June 2001.

harness which helps the “harvest of hearts” reaped by the Gospel go in the same direction.

- The liturgy helps us do what we do together. We sing together, we pray together, we hear together, we speak together, we fellowship together, we take the sacrament together. This “one another-ness” in worship is central to the life of the church. It is fine for us to “do our own thing” when we are by ourselves (of course this must be governed by Scripture too), but when we are together we must function as a community.
- Liturgy Connects Us to the Church: Today’s church is not the first nor will we be the last to worship the one, true God. To ignore our connections to the historic church is the height of pride. Furthermore, in our post-modern age of rootlessness the historic church provides our people with a sense of God’s movements throughout history. When we use the liturgy—the creeds, ancient hymns and music—it connects our people to God’s cosmic work throughout the ages.

#### B. A Few Words about Worship Styles:

- Worship styles are not THE ISSUE: Hopefully, by now this issue has been put in a new light. Redeemer’s worship will first and foremost seek to do what I have already talked about: *Seeing God Rightly and Savoring God Truly*. No matter what style—contemporary, high church or traditional—one adopts, the liturgy must incorporate the elements of worship revealed in Scripture—Apostles’ Teaching, Fellowship, The Sacraments and The Prayers.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts. 2:42)

Now, those elements can be organized in a variety of ways, but we will organize them according to the “Gospel’s logic”. This organization is also displayed in the Lord’s prayer and in Isaiah 6:1-9.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the whole foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.” And he said, “Go....” (Isaiah 6:1-9)

This organization simply takes us through what it looks like to encounter God. In praising God, we come to know ourselves as sinners and in need. In coming to grace we discover our place and are sent out with his blessing. The wisdom of this approach is that it seeks to carry the “weightiness” of the worship event with buckets/forms that can hold that weight. For this reason, certain things will be excluded and other things will be included. Nevertheless, these principles do not have to be pressed into one form or musical style.

- Both Form and Freedom Characterize Worship:

Fundamental to our form of worship is the commitment that we will only worship in the way God has prescribed. Yet, the Bible teaches surprisingly little about the nature of corporate worship. Therefore, we have both Form and Freedom in ordering our worship. Acts 2:42 articulates those “elements” of NT worship that are clearly “prescribed” by God. However, the organization of those elements is not specified anywhere in the NT. The logic of the gospel found in Isaiah and elsewhere is a compelling OW which we have the freedom to utilize. Of course, there are areas of freedom including: time of worship, musical style and hymn selection, dress of pastor and congregation, lighting, architecture—well a lot of stuff.

- Every Style has its Strengths and Weaknesses: The goal is to maximize the strengths of the chosen worship style and minimize the weaknesses.

God is not more impressed with the professional opera star singing a solo from the Messiah than He is with Aunt Hannah’s nephew on violin. God is above all culture, higher than all culture. Our highest and best is not good enough for God. But, we will want to give him our best. Skip Ryan

For example:

Contemporary Worship: Its strengths revolve around the imminence of God, his closeness. Contemporary services often convey a sense of warmth and intimacy. In a broken, fragmented generation this has some real advantages. Even so, its weaknesses are manifest when this emphasis loses balance with the transcendence of God. CW tends to an uncritical acceptance of anything “popular.” This can lead to several problems which result in trivializing God and ultimately trivializing us. As the saying goes, “You are what you worship.” CW can create a restlessness characteristic of the age.

Traditional Worship: Its strengths revolve around the transcendence of God, his otherness/holiness. Traditional worship services are often strong on conveying a sense of the majesty and splendor of God enabling the worship to consider and reverence God. Even so, its weaknesses are manifest when this style: hides issues of spiritual ill-health (e.g. an unconverted congregation where the Spirit does not live—Dead Orthodoxy or a congregation where the Truth of the Scripture is no longer upheld—Heterodoxy), is characterized by stiffness and a formality that is inconsistent with the Shepherd of our souls, chooses word selections/vocabulary that seems “weird, out of date, or out of touch” or becomes a badge of cultural elitism (e.g. what we do is excellent and other people are just dumb, unenlightened, etc.).

If contemporary worship folks are chronologically snobby about the present, traditional worship folks can be chronologically snobby about the past. Skip Ryan

- What we mean by Truth and Vibrancy: People have categorized the issues surrounding worship in so many ways; we have chosen to use the words truth and vibrancy.

Broadly speaking, our “style” of worship must take into account matters of TRUTH as defined by the Bible and manifested in the history of the church. The Bible defines true worship and the church has practiced at various points in her history true worship. We have, in other words, an authority and models to which we are accountable.

By VIBRANCY we mean to take into account matters of cultural context. We must worship in “our time and in our place.” These factors encompass many things including: music selection, vocabulary, levels of informality even architecture. Worship must be informed by one’s cultural context, not conformed to that cultural context. When the cultural context does not inform what we do, then by default some other culture does (And, this is most likely a culture that no longer is alive.)

Finally, VIBRANCY also seeks to capture the importance of the congregation worshipping through the renewing power of the Gospel. If the congregation has not and is not encountering God really and truly, worship will simply not happen. Of course, the Word is what creates that worshipping heart.

- The Tone/Atmosphere of Worship must reflect the Gospel: This means that there must be both warmth and reverence in worship. There must be a sense of intimacy and awe. One without the other will impoverish our worship.

Central to this is the pre-worship period and after-worship period when the church community is gathering. Sunday is our day to see each other and be refreshed with each other. An atmosphere of joy and celebration should characterize our welcome and greeting of one another prior to worship. And, after worship there will always be refreshments and coffee so that a natural gathering spot is formed and relationships are built. If someone is not experiencing the joy of the Gospel and are not seeking to build relationships they are working against the vision of Redeemer Church.

The liturgy helps here too by moving us through a variety of emotional responses to God. First we begin with the majesty and wonder of God which should evoke a strong sense of reverence and awe. We then contemplate ourselves in view of the holiness of God and are renewed in the Gospel’s grace. This should evoke both contrition and joy. As someone said, “We confess our sins not to grovel in our guilt, but to deal with our guilt.” In dealing with our guilt through the gospel we find a Godly repentance and grief that leads to salvation and joy (2 Cor. 7:9-10). Now, coming to the Word and Sacraments an atmosphere of warmth and intimacy should be present. The Shepherd of our souls has come to feed and nurture us with his chosen “means” of grace—the preached Word and the Lord’s Supper. Our responses should encompass the full range of that encounter with God: thanksgiving, reverence, contrition, awe, wonder, joy, love, humility, etc.

During worship our hearts should expand in their love for God and in the range of their emotional expression as we encounter our Redeemer’s love and grace. This “heart expansion” will also manifest itself along the horizontal scale in our relationships with one another. A heart that is opening up to God will be a heart that is softening, being broken, learning gentleness, love, compassion, perseverance and patience with those around him/her.

#### C. A Few Words about Participation:

- Worship is a “Contact Sport” not a “Spectator Sport”: The worshippers are those in attendance not simply the pastor, the worship leaders, the choir or other “up-front” people. Worship enlists everyone together. Furthermore it is DIALOGICAL. God speaks and we respond. Our response is kind of “full-body” contact. So, there is something right about standing, raising hands, clapping hands, coming forward to receive the sacrament, bowing our heads, etc.
- Worship is celebration of the Word and Sacrament: Central to the worship is its “receiving” character. When we hear the Word and receive the sacrament we are expressing our need for the Gospel’s renewing power. To exclude the Lord’s Supper from weekly supper would be similar to excluding the preached word. The sacrament helps us sensibly understand the Word that we have heard. It makes it palpable to us. Jesus forgiveness, grace, love, etc. is as real as the taste of the bread and wine.

D. A Few Words about Evangelism in Worship:

Worship must be Evangelistic: *Doxological Evangelism*. How do we do this? It involves three things:

- Preparation: Getting unbelievers there: Do we really want unbelievers around us? Are we expecting them to be with us? The importance of personal invitations. The importance of preparing the service as if unbelievers are there. Eventually they will be there.
- Connection: Finding Points of Contact w/unbelievers:
  - Quality aesthetics:
 

I would go so far as to say that when planting a church, you determine its future size by the importance you place on aesthetics in worship. Tim Keller
- Comprehensibility: If people don’t understand you based upon your vocabulary, style of speaking or whatever, you are wasting their time. The church has developed its own “lingo” (especially Reformed and Presbyterian churches), which really alienates rather than evangelizes. It is necessary to speak forth the truth in the vernacular so that people can understand. Heavy “theological” preaching may serve to impress a Reformed and mature congregation; it will do little to see the Gospel go forth.

Central to this is preaching to the heart. The remedy to showing the relevancy of theology is connecting truth to the heart. So often, sermons outline a doctrine and do not show how it is relevant to the heart. However, when preaching exposes the hearts need before a holy God and then shows how Christ, revealed in the Scriptures, meets us in that need, relevancy is achieved.

Connected to this is the importance of avoiding unnecessary theological jargon. When certain terms are used—confession of sin, grace, gospel, kingdom, law, etc—it is important to explain them in everyday terms. In fact, it is necessary to explain the whole service as we go along so that no one is left behind thinking that we’re doing something just because “that’s the way we do it.”

- Leading to Commitment:
  - During the Worship: Moments of decision throughout the service, especially in the Sacrament. For example, I could say, "The Lord's Supper is a family meal whereby Christians not only remember Christ, but experience his grace afresh and are strengthened and renewed in the Christian life. If you are not in a saving relationship with Christ today, don't take the bread and the cup, but as others come forward, receive Christ into your heart right there in your seat. Then, come up after the service and tell an officer or the pastor what has happened, so that we can prepare you take the Lord's Supper as soon as possible."
  - After Meetings: Eventually, we will begin a Q/A session after the worship service for the congregation. These times are ideal for helping people distill the message, the liturgy and the Christian life. These meetings are also ideal to help people move towards a community group setting.
  - Community Assimilation: Community Groups the church community ongoing throughout the week. Enfolding new visitors into the cells of community enable someone to "find a place" or "make a commitment to Christ."