

Gravity and Gladness on Sunday Morning

The Pursuit of God in Corporate Worship

By John Piper

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Published by
Desiring God Ministries
720 13th Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55415
888-346-4700
www.desiringGOD.org

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The Intensification of Worship as an Inward Experience of the Heart

Thesis

The essential, vital, indispensable, defining heart of worship is the experience of being satisfied with God because God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. The chief end of man is to glorify God BY enjoying him for ever.

Problem

This involves a fairly radical simplification or narrowing of the focus from what is often included under the term worship.

Aim

To show from the New Testament that this simplifying, narrowing tendency in talking about the heart of worship is Biblical and in line with the Reformed and Puritan tradition. In the New Testament is an stunning degree of indifference to worship as an outward form and a radical intensification of worship as in inward experience of the heart.

Observation

In the New Testament there is very little instruction that deals explicitly with corporate worship – what we call worship services. There were corporate gatherings, but they are not called “worship.”

1 Corinthians 14:23 speaks of “the whole church gathering together.”

Acts 2:46 speaks of the early church “attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes.”

Hebrews 10:25 speaks of “not neglecting to meet together.”

Question

What becomes of the Old Testament use of the main word for “worship” (*hishtahavah*)?

Its basic meaning is “bow down” with the sense of reverence and respect and honor.

It occurs 171 times.

In the Greek Old Testament, 164 of those instances of this Hebrew word are translated by the Greek *proskuneo*.

In the Greek New Testament this is the main word for worship, but something astonishing appears:

Proskuneo is common in the Gospels (26 times). People would often bow down worshipfully before Jesus. And it is common in the book of Revelation (21 times) because the angels and elders in heaven often bow down before God.

But in the epistles of Paul it occurs only once, namely, in 1 Corinthians 14:25 where the unbeliever falls down at the power of prophecy and confesses God is in the assembly. It doesn't occur at all in the letters of Peter, James, or John. Hebrews 1:6 and 11:21 are OT quotations. Acts 7:43, 8:27, 10:25, and 24:11 do not refer to Christian worship.

Question

Why are the very epistles that are written to help the church be what it ought to be in this age almost totally devoid of this word and of explicit teaching on the specifics of corporate worship?

Possible Answer

I think the reason is found in the way Jesus treated worship in his life and teaching.

Mark 11:17, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.” When he wove a whip and drove out the money changers the reason he gives is not for the sake of proper sacrifices, but for the sake of prayer. In other words, he focused attention away from the outward acts of Jewish sacrifices to the personal act of communion with God for all peoples.

In Matthew 12:6, Jesus said, “Something greater than the Temple is here,” referring to himself.

In John 2:19 Jesus said, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” This attitude to the Temple not only got him killed (Mark 14:58; 15:29), but it also got Stephen killed (Acts 6:14). That's how important it was.

Jesus was identifying himself as the true Temple. In himself he will fulfill everything the Temple stood for, especially the place where believers meet God.

So here again he is diverting attention away from worship as a localized thing with outward forms to a personal, spiritual experience with himself at the center. Worship does not need a building, a priesthood, and a sacrificial system. It needs the risen Jesus.

In John 4:20-24 is the key to why the Old Testament word for worship (*proskuneo*) did not fit the reality of the worship Jesus was bringing. [The woman at the well said], “Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship (*proskuneo*)”; Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father.”

Here you can see him loosening worship from its outward and localized connotations. Place is not the issue: “neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” He goes on:

“But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Here is the key sentence: true worship, which was anticipated for the age to come, has arrived, “the hour is coming (in the age to come) and now is (here in me).” And what marks this true future worship that has broken into the present time from the glorious age to come is that it is not bound by localized place or outward form. Instead of being in this mountain or in Jerusalem, it is “in spirit and in truth.”

What Jesus is doing here is stripping *proskuneo* of its last vestiges of localized and outward connotation. Not that it will be wrong for worship to be in a place or that it will be wrong for it to use outward forms; but, rather, he is making explicit and central that this is not what makes worship worship. What makes worship worship is what happens “in spirit and in truth” – with or without a place and with or without outward forms.

Question

What do those two phrases mean: “in spirit” and “in truth”?

I take “in spirit” to mean that this true worship is carried along by the Holy Spirit and is happening mainly as an inward, spiritual event, not mainly as an outward, bodily event.

And I take “in truth” to mean that this true worship is a response to true views of God and is shaped and guided by true views of God.

So what Jesus has done is break decisively the necessary connection between worship and its outward and localized associations. It is mainly something inward and free from locality. This is what he meant when he said, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me” (Matthew

15:8-9). When the heart is far from God, worship is vain, empty, non-existent. The experience of the heart is the defining, vital, indispensable essence of worship.

Question

Why then is the central Old Testament word for worship, *proskuneo*, virtually boycotted by Peter, James, John, and Paul in the letters they write to the churches?

Answer

The word did not make clear enough the inward, spiritual nature of true worship. It carried significant connotations of place and form. The word was associated with bodily bowing down and with the actual presence of a visible manifestation to bow down before. So it is prevalent in the Gospels and Revelation where Jesus is physically present to the worshippers, but in the epistles Jesus is not present in visible glory to fall before. Therefore, the whole tendency of the early church was to deal with worship as primarily inward and spiritual rather than outward and bodily; primarily pervasive rather than localized.

To Confirm This

Consider what Paul does to some of the other words related to Old Testament worship.

Latreuo

The next most frequent word for worship in the Old Testament (after *proskuneo*) is the word *latreuo* (over 90 times, almost always translating *`abad*) which is usually translated “serve” as in Exodus 23:24, “You shall not worship their gods or serve them.”

When Paul uses it for Christian worship he goes out of his way to make sure that we know he means not a localized or outward form for worship practice, but a non-localized, spiritual experience. In fact, he takes it so far as to treat virtually all of life as worship when lived in the right spirit. For example, in Romans 1:9 he says, “I serve (or: worship) God in my spirit in the preaching of the Gospel.” And in Philippians 3:3, Paul says that true Christians “worship God in the Spirit of God . . . and put no confidence in the flesh.” And in Romans 12:1, Paul urges Christians to “present your bodies as living and holy sacrifices acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship.”

The Language of Temple, Sacrifice, and Priestly Service

The praise and thanks of the lips is called a sacrifice to God (Hebrews 13:15). But so are good works in everyday life (Hebrews 13:16). Paul calls his own ministry a “priestly service (of worship)” and he calls the converts themselves an “acceptable offering (in worship)” to God (Romans 15:16; cf. Philippians 2:17). He even calls the money that the churches send him “a fragrant aroma and acceptable sacrifice to God (in worship)” (Philippians 4:18). And his own death for Christ he calls a “drink offering to God” (2 Timothy 4:6).

The same thrust is seen in the imagery of the people of God (body of Christ) as the New Testament “temple” where spiritual sacrifices are offered (1 Peter 2:5) and where God dwells by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:21-22) and where all the people seen as the holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5, 9). 2 Corinthians 6:16 shows that the New Covenant hope of God's presence is being fulfilled even now in the church as a people, not in any particular service: “We are the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’”

Worship is being significantly de-institutionalized, de-localized, de-externalized. The whole thrust is being taken off of ceremony and seasons and places and forms and is being shifted to what is happening in the heart – not just on Sunday, but every day and all the time in all of life.

All of Life to the Glory of God

This what it means when we read things like, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). And: “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:17). This is the essence of worship: to act in a way that reflects the glory of God – to do a thing in the name of Jesus with thanks to God.

Singing and Making Melody to the Lord

Even when Paul calls us to “be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father” (Ephesians 5:18-20), there is no reference to a time or place or a service. In fact, the key word is “always” – “always giving thanks for all things in the name of Jesus.” This may in fact be what we should do in a corporate worship service, but it is not Paul’s burden to tell us that. His burden is to call for a radical, inward authenticity of worship and an all-encompassing pervasiveness of worship in all of life. Place and form are not of the essence. Spirit and truth are all-important.

The Reformed and Puritan Tradition

They saw that worship is radically oriented on the experience of the heart with little emphasis on form and place.

John Calvin

[The Master] did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended on the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages) . . . Because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation

and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe. (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 2, John Calvin, edited by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960], p. 1208)

Luther

The worship of God . . . should be free at table, in private rooms, downstairs, upstairs, at home, abroad, in all places, by all people, at all times. Whoever tells you anything else is lying as badly as the pope and the devil himself. (*What Luther Says*, vol. III, ed. by Ewald M. Plass, [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959], p. 1546)

The Puritans

The Puritans carried through the simplification and freedom of worship in music and liturgy and architecture. Patrick Collinson summarizes Puritan theory and practice by saying:

. . . the life of the puritan was in one sense a continuous act of worship, pursued under an unremitting and lively sense of God's providential purposes and constantly refreshed by religious activity, personal, domestic and public. (Quoted in Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as they Really Were*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986], p. 116).

One of the reasons Puritans called their churches "meeting houses" and kept them very simple was to divert attention from the physical place to the inward, spiritual nature of worship.

Conclusion

In the New Testament there is a stunning indifference to the outward forms and places of worship. And there is at the same time a radical intensification of worship as an inward, spiritual experience that has no bounds and pervades all of life. These emphases were recaptured in the Reformation and came to clear expression in the Puritan wing of the Reformed tradition.

Next Question

What is the essence of that radical, authentic, inward experience called worship, and how is it that this experience comes to expression in gathered congregations and in every day life?

What is the Inward Essence of Worship?

Thesis

The essential, vital, indispensable, defining heart of worship is the experience of being satisfied with God. This satisfaction in God magnifies God in the heart. This explains why the apostle Paul makes so little distinction between worship as a congregational service and worship as a pattern of daily life. They have the same root – a passion for treasuring God as infinitely valuable. The impulse for singing a hymn and the impulse for visiting a prisoner is the same: a thirst for God – a desire to experience as much satisfaction in God as we can.

Question

Is this Biblical? The root of our passion and thirst for God is God's own infinite exuberance for God.

God creates for his glory.

Isaiah 43:6-7

Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, every one who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory.

God elects Israel for his glory.

Jeremiah 13:11

I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says the LORD, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory.

God saves them from Egypt for his glory.

Psalm 106:7-8

Our fathers rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea. Yet he saved them for his name's sake that he might make known his power.

God restrains his anger in exile for his glory.

Isaiah 48:9, 11

For my names sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you . . . For my own sake, for my own sake I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.

God sends Christ to earth for his glory.

Romans 15:7-8

Christ became a servant to the circumcision to show God's truthfulness . . . and in order that the gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

John 17:1

Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee.

God sends his Son the second time for his glory.

2 Thessalonians 1:9-10

Those who do not obey the gospel will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints and to be marveled at in all who have believed.

Our calling is to manifest the worth of this glory in the world.

Psalm 96:3

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all peoples.

Psalm 117:1

Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples!

God's overflowing joy in his own glory is the root and basis of ours. God is so exuberant about his glory that he makes it's display the goal of all that he does. Therefore, so should we.

Question

But putting it that way doesn't quite get to the heart of the matter. To get to the heart of the matter we need to ask: Why is it a loving thing for God to be so self-exalting; and

why, if we come to share his satisfaction in himself, is it the essence and heart of worship?

Answer

The answer to the first question – why is it loving of God to be so self-exalting that he does all that he does for his own glory? – came to me with the help of C.S. Lewis. He saw an utterly crucial thing that shows why this is not vain, but profoundly loving of God to do. Here is the all-important insight that he wrote:

The most obvious fact about praise . . . strangely escaped me . . . I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise . . . The world rings with praise – lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game – praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians and scholars . . . My whole, more general difficulty about praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of complement that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are, the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. (C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World 1958], pp. 93-95.)

Therefore, if God loves us the way the Bible says he does, then he would give us what is best for us. And what is best for us is Himself, not just his gifts. But if our enjoyment is incomplete until it comes to completion in praise, then God would not be loving if he was indifferent to our praise.

Jonathan Edwards made the connection between our joy and worship clearest for me:

God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways: 1. By appearing to . . . their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying, the manifestations which He makes of Himself. . . . God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in. When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart. God made the world that He might communicate, and the creature receive, His glory; and that it might [be]

received both by the mind and heart. He that testifies his idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it. (Jonathan Edwards, The "Miscellanies," ed. by Thomas Schafer, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 13 [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994], p. 495. Miscellany #448).

Therefore, when God commands us to pursue joy in him, he is both loving us and honoring himself. He is seeking worshippers by calling us to seek our joy in him.

Philippians 4:6

Rejoice in the Lord, and again I will say, rejoice.

Psalms 100:2

Serve the Lord with gladness.

Psalms 37:4

Delight yourself in the Lord.

Psalms 32:11

Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones.

Psalms 16:11

In thy presence is fullness of joy and at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.

Conclusion

The essential, vital, indispensable, defining heart of worship is the experience of being satisfied in God. The reason satisfaction in God is the heart of worship is that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. This is why Jesus and the apostles were so stunningly indifferent to external forms and so radically intent on the inward, spiritual authenticity of worship. Without the experience of heartfelt satisfaction in God, praises are vain. If genuine praise can flow from a heart without satisfaction in God, then the word "hypocrisy" has no meaning, and Jesus' words are pointless when he says, "They worship me with their lips (that is, with praises), but their heart (that is, their satisfaction) is far from me" (Matthew 15:8).

Some Implications

The pursuit of joy in God is not optional. It is our highest duty.

There are millions of Christians who have absorbed a popular ethic that comes more from Immanuel Kant than from the Bible, namely, that it is morally deficient to seek our happiness – to pursue joy, to crave satisfaction, and devote ourselves to seeking it.

This is absolutely deadly for authentic worship. To the degree that this ethic flourishes, to that degree worship dies. For the essence of worship is satisfaction in God. To be indifferent to, or even fearful of, the pursuit of what is essential to worship is to resist worship.

Many pastors foster this very thing by saying things like: “The problem is that our people don’t come on Sunday morning to give; they only come to get. If they came to give, we would have life in our services.” That is not an accurate diagnosis. People ought to come to get. They ought to come starved for God. They ought to come saying, “As a deer pants for the flowing springs, so my soul pants for thee O God” (Psalm 42:1). God is mightily honored when a people know that they will die of hunger and thirst unless they have God. And it is the job of pastors to spread a banquet for them.

Recovering the rightness and indispensability of pursuing our satisfaction in God will go a long way to restoring authenticity and power of worship.

Another implication of saying that the essence of worship is satisfaction in God is that worship becomes radically God-centered.

Nothing makes God more supreme and more central than when a people are utterly persuaded that nothing – not money or prestige or leisure or family or job or health or sports or toys or friends – nothing is going to bring satisfaction to their aching hearts besides God. This conviction breeds a people who go hard after God on Sunday morning.

They are not confused about why they are there. They do not see songs and prayers and sermons as mere traditions or mere duties. They see them as means of getting to God or God getting to them for more of his fullness.

If the focus shifts onto our giving to God, one result I have seen again and again is that subtly it is not God that remains at the center, but the quality of our giving. Are we singing worthily of the Lord? Are our instrumentalists playing with quality fitting a gift to the Lord? Is the preaching a suitable offering to the Lord. And little by little the focus shifts off the utter indispensability of the Lord himself onto the quality of our performances. And we even start to define excellence and power in worship in terms of the technical distinction of our artistic acts.

Nothing keeps God at the center of worship like the Biblical conviction that the essence of worship is deep, heartfelt satisfaction in Him, and the conviction that the pursuit of that satisfaction is why we are together.

A third implication of saying that the essence of worship is satisfaction in God is that it protects the primacy of worship by forcing us to come to terms with the fact that worship is an end in itself.

If the essence of worship is satisfaction in God, then worship can't be a means to anything else. You simply can't say to God, "I want to be satisfied in you so that I can have something else." That would mean that you are not really satisfied in God, but in something else. And that would dishonor God, not worship him.

In fact, for thousands of people and pastors the event of "worship" on Sunday morning is conceived of as a means to accomplish something other than worship. We "worship" to raise money; we "worship" to attract crowds; we "worship" to heal human hurts; we "worship" to recruit workers; we "worship" to improve church morale; we "worship" to give talented musicians an opportunity to fulfill their calling; we "worship" to teach our children the way of righteousness; we "worship" to help marriages stay together; we "worship" to evangelize the lost among us; we "worship" to motivate people for service projects; we "worship" to give our churches a family feeling, etc., etc.

In all of this we bear witness that we do not know what true worship is. Genuine affections for God are an end in themselves. I cannot say to my wife: "I feel a strong delight in you so that you will make me a nice meal." That is not the way delight works. It terminates on her. It does not have a nice meal in view. I cannot say to my son, "I love playing ball with you – so that you will cut the grass." If your heart really delights in playing ball with him, that delight cannot be performed as a means to getting him to do something.

Now I am not denying that worship may have a hundred good effects on the life of the church. It will, just like true affection in marriage makes everything better. My point is that to the degree that we do "worship" for these reasons, to that degree it ceases to be authentic worship. Keeping satisfaction in God at the center guards us from that tragedy.

Finally, the last implication of saying that the essence of worship is being satisfied with God is that this accounts for why Paul makes all of life an expression of worship.

All Christian behavior is to be done out of satisfaction in God and with a view to preserving and increasing our satisfaction in God. I wrote a whole book to justify that sentence (*Desiring God*), but let me commend it to you with one word from the Lord Jesus.

In Luke 12:33 he says, "Sell your possessions, and give alms; [and thus] provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail."

The treasure in heaven I take to be increased measures of joy at God's right hand and pleasures in his fellowship in the age to come. Jesus says that we are to provide ourselves

with that – in other words, make efforts to increase your joys with God in heaven. He says that the way to do this is to sell your possessions and to give alms. That is simply illustrative of all the ways we sacrifice and love in the Christian life. Live this way so as to provide yourself with treasures in heaven.

In other words, aim in all you do to maximize your satisfaction in God – now and in the age to come. And if someone asks, Is it loving to give alms to others with a view to maximizing our own joy in God, the answer is a resounding Yes! Because in giving up worldly things ourselves so that we can meet the needs of others, our aim is to persuade them that the treasure of God that frees us to give like this is so valuable they too should embrace it and live for it and so join us in the joys of heaven. People will feel loved if they see that their joining us in the enjoyment of God will increase our joy in God.

So I believe it can be shown Biblically that all our behavior should be motivated by a deep satisfaction in God and a desire to expand that satisfaction by spreading it into the lives of others. Therefore, the root of Christian living and the root of congregational praise are the same. Which is why, for Paul, worship simply cannot be merely, or even mainly, thought of in terms of Sunday services, but of all of life. His has an absolutely God-saturated vision of Christian existence. When our whole life is consumed with pursuing satisfaction in God, everything we do highlights the value and worth of God. Which simply means that everything becomes worship. May God make himself that precious to us.

Worship Services Are Normative and Preaching Is a Normative Part

Thesis One

Regular corporate seasons (or services) of worship – the pursuit of full satisfaction in God through supplication (expressing dependence and longing for God), thanks (expressing gratitude for God’s glory and gifts), and praise (expressing the delight of admiration and adoration) to God – are normative for local churches.

There are at least three arguments for this claim:

1. There is a pattern of corporate worship in the Old Testament, and we may assume the regular gatherings of the early Christians had similar elements although the details of what was in the New Testament gatherings for worship are very sparse. This vagueness is, I believe, intentional on God’s part so that the New Testament will be a very flexible missions book for all cultures, not a prescription of form that would make cultural adaptation harder.
2. We have seen already in this course that God’s aim in the universe is to be known and enjoyed by his creatures and thus to be shown more glorious than any other reality. Corporate worship is one essential way that God designs for this display of his glory to be expressed in the world and in anticipation of the final perfect worship of the age to come.
3. Corporate unified supplication, thanks, and praise displays more of the glory of God than individual acts of supplication, thanks, and praise because harmony in diversity is intrinsically more beautiful than mere unison; harmony in diversity requires more grace from God to bring it about among sinful people who by nature are selfish and want their own way rather than referring to others in love. (See *Let the Nations Be Glad*, pp. 215-217.)

Thesis Two

Supplication, thanks, and praise will honor God in proportion to the intensity and authenticity of the affections responding to the truth of God and his ways. There is such a thing as hypocrisy and a mere “form of godliness.” They are deadly and no honor to God.

Thesis Three

In the real world of ordinary Christians, the pursuit of satisfaction in God through supplication, thanks, and praise do not usually arise in the hearts of God's people without being stirred up in some way when they come together. That is, the average Christian does not come to a worship service filled with joy in God and ready to overflow. There are at least three reasons for this.

1. Our own remaining corruption and sin, the world-system in which we live, and Satan himself all work to blur our sight and dull our affections of spiritual reality.
2. God designs for us to live on the Word of God in a continual way for the sake of the effects it has on our affections. In other words, in this world it is normal to go backward without continual exposure to the Word of God awakening in us the spiritual affections God deserves from us.
3. God also designs that some of this continual exposure to the Word of God be provided by leaders in the church whose calling it is to make truth known to the people and to be examples of Godward affection for them. Thus, it is not only a sign of weakness, but of God's appointed will that the spiritual life of a people depend in some measure on the regular gathering for exposure to these leaders' work.

Thesis Four

Therefore, essential to a corporate season of supplication, thanks, and praise is a fresh declaration of truth about God and a fresh demonstration of affection for God.

This is true not only because ordinary Christians need to be exposed to truth and awakened afresh to its value in order to respond authentically and intensely, but also because the declaration of God's truth and the demonstration of its value with appropriate affections is worship. That is, it displays the value of God in that it shows he is worth knowing and proclaiming and feeling strongly about.

Thus it would be misleading to think of the declaration of God's truth and the demonstration of affection for God as preparation for worship. It does awaken worship. But it is worship and should always be seen that way.

Thesis Five

This fresh declaration of truth about God, and fresh demonstration of affection for God, honor God most and help people honor him best when they happen in the same act called preaching, rather than being separated into instruction (teaching or lecture) and inspiration (music or testimony).

If these are separated, a false message is sent to the people, namely, that truth about God

is not the key to spiritual awakening, but rather that some other avenue to the heart must be found.

It would also send the misleading message that inspiration can rightly awaken the affections without a Biblical vision of God functioning as the basis of those awakened affections.

Thesis Six

There is Biblical evidence from the time of Ezra to Jesus to the Synagogue to the beginnings of the Christian church that corporate worship included preaching.

Nehemiah 8:6-8

And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God; and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

Luke 4:16-21

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Acts 15:21

"For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him (tou.j khru,ssontaj auvto.n), since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

Acts 13:14-16

But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people (lo,goj paraklh,sewj pro.j to.n lao,n), say it." Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen ..."

Colossians 1:28

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

Romans 1:15

So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you [Christians] also who are in Rome.

2 Timothy 3:16 – 4:4

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

Thesis Seven

Therefore, preaching as worship, or preaching as expository exultation, is a normative element in worship services. This way of warranting preaching in worship will have profound effects on how the preacher pursues the preparation and execution of his work.

What Unites Us in Worship

A Philosophy Of Music And Worship

God-centeredness

A high priority on the vertical focus of our Sunday morning service. The ultimate aim is to so experience God that he is glorified in our affections.

Come on the look out for God, leave on the look out for people.

Remove horizontal intrusions between vertical acts.

Choose songs that make much of God and not man.

Make even the welcome as Godward as possible.

Going Hard After God

Pursue and express the deepest satisfaction in all that God is for us in Jesus.

Express from the pulpit longing for God in Christ.

Encourage prayer before the service and in the service.

Teach a Godward longing in all acts of worship.

Expecting the Powerful Presence of God

We do not just direct ourselves toward him. We earnestly seek his drawing near according to the promise of James 4:8: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." We believe that in worship God draws near to us in power and makes Himself known and felt for our good and for the salvation of unbelievers in the midst.

God is not far but near.

Anticipate being ready for his moving among us now.

The demeanor of those who stand before the face of God.

Bible-based and Bible-saturated

The content of our singing and praying and welcoming and preaching and poetry will always conform to the truth of Scripture. The content of God's Word will be woven through all we do in worship. It will be the ground of all our appeal to authority. Preaching (expository exultation) will be central.

Seeing and savoring God happens by means of his self-revelation, which he gives through his Word.

Check unfitting human intrusion and inventiveness by testing all by the Word.

God is honored when his Word is prominent and pervasive.

Head and Heart

True worship aims at kindling and carrying deep, strong, real emotions toward God, but does not manipulate people's emotions by failing to appeal to clear thinking about spiritual things based on shareable evidences outside ourselves.

Keeping these together is the difference between emotion and emotionalism; and between intellectual and intellectualism.

God is more glorified when known and enjoyed than either alone.

Thinking and feeling can conflict, but in the long run the tension produces deeper, more durable feeling and wiser thinking.

Earnestness and Intensity

Avoid a trite, flippant, superficial, frivolous atmosphere, but in stead set an example of reverence and passion and wonder.

We are very serious about being happy in God.

Jokes are rarely fitting. Levity makes true worship harder.

There is a difference between natural life-humor and contrived communication-humor.

Heaven and hell are stupendous realities that deserve a certain demeanor.

People are hungry for something different from the glib, chipper, silly fare of TV.

Authentic Communication

Authentic communication requires the utter renunciation of all sham and deceit and hypocrisy and pretense and affectation and posturing; no atmosphere of artistic or oratorical performance, but the atmosphere of a radically personal encounter with God and truth.

Manifest vulnerability that does not give the impression of hiding or flawlessness.

Avoid tones or mannerisms that seem phony or stylized or affected.

Model real, authentic communion with God and people.

Lead worshippers (not just worship leaders) must worship authentically.

The Manifestation of God and the Common Good

We expect and hope and pray (according to 1 Corinthians 12:7, “To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”) that our focus on manifesting God is good for people and that therefore a spirit of love for each other is not incompatible with, but necessary to authentic worship.

Worship has a horizontal effect while being vertical in focus. All the people should think of how others are helped to experience God by their Godward hunger and demeanor.

Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:18-19).

Undistracting Excellence

We will try to sing and play and pray and preach in such a way that people’s attention will not be diverted from the substance by shoddy ministry nor by excessive finesse, elegance, or refinement. Natural, undistracting excellence will let the truth and beauty of God shine through.

Sound system, music playing, welcome, lighting, heat, ushering, welcoming, parking, facilities – all undistracting from the aim of thinking about God.

Avoid the flair of words and chords that draw attention mainly to the performance and style and not the substance.

Determination to Welcome People Different from Ourselves for the Sake of Christ

We aim to be more indigenous to the diversity of our metropolitan cultural setting, both urban and suburban.

Racial togetherness says much about the power of God and his universal attractiveness.

The Mingling of Historic and Contemporary Music in Heartfelt Congregational Singing

And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matthew 13:52).

“Sing a new song to the Lord.”

But remember the great works of old, and don't be chronologically snobbish.

Mine the riches of the ages.

Speak the language and adapt some forms to the present.

Fine and Folk in Worship

Thoughts On Worship And Culture

The New Testament Is Very Open-ended on Cultural Forms

There is very little in the New Testament about the forms and style and content of corporate worship. Following Old Testament forms too closely contradicts the obsolescence of the wineskins. God must mean to leave the matter of form and style and content to the judgment of our spiritual wisdom - not to our whim or our tradition, but to prayerful, thoughtful, culturally alert, self-critical, Bible-saturated, God-centered, Christ-exalting, reflection driven by a passion to be filled with all the fullness of God. I assume this will be an ongoing process, not a one-time effort.

Culture Falls on a Continuum of Folk and Fine

One way to describe the differences in how people approach worship is to speak in terms of fine culture and folk culture. By “culture” I mean a pattern of life including thought and emotion and speech and activity. By “fine culture” I have in mind the pattern of life that puts a high priority on intellectual and artistic expressions that require extraordinary ability to produce and often demand disciplined efforts to understand and appreciate. By “folk culture” I have in mind the pattern of life that puts a high priority on expressions of heart and mind that please and help average people without demanding unusual effort.

For example, it’s the difference between classical music and blue grass (or easy listening or rock or show tunes or oldies or country western - all of which are “the music of the people,” though I realize there is a continuum rather than a neat box for all kinds and qualities of music.)

Or another example would be the contrast between a Shakespearean drama at the Guthrie Theatre and “The Empire Strikes Back” at a movie theater.

Or one might think of the difference between reading Gerard Manley Hopkins’ Poem “The Windhover - To Christ Our Lord”:

“I caught this morning’s minion, kingdom of
 daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,
 in his riding
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air,
 and striding
 High there, how he rung upon the rein of a

wimpling wing.”

Or, on the other hand, reading the homespun poetry of Edgar A. Guest:

“It takes a heap ‘o livin’ to make a house a home.”

We Should Not Pass Judgment on Fine Culture or Folk Culture Per Se

There are caricatures of the excesses in both that are easy to condemn. That is not our purpose. It is more profitable to consider the strengths and weaknesses built in to both of them so as to avoid the weaknesses and affirm the strengths in both. Fine culture and folk culture have intrinsic vulnerabilities to sin and unique potentialities for God-glorifying goodness. They are redeemable.

There Are Intrinsic Vulnerabilities of Fine Culture

Intrinsic vulnerabilities of high culture include elitism and snobbishness. In demanding high levels of intellect and skill, it easily inflates the ego of those who succeed in it, and tempts them to look with contempt on folk culture with its simpler achievements. It easily isolates technical expertise from the larger issues of life and attempts to give it intrinsic value instead of defining its value in relation to other, more important spiritual and personal realities. It is inevitably less accessible to average people and therefore tends toward performance rather than participation, and this performance orientation carries again the tendency toward an atmosphere of aloofness and distance.

There Are Intrinsic Vulnerabilities of Folk Culture

Intrinsic vulnerabilities of folk culture include a laziness and carelessness. There is an intrinsic drift toward increasing indifference to simple disciplines that define excellence at the most rudimentary levels (for example, using bad grammar in worship songs like “you reigneth” or having “you” and “thou” in the same line. This is not like the word “ain’t” in “You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog.” It’s like singing “Thou ain’t nothin but a hound dog.”). Folk culture, with its intrinsic anti-intellectualism tends to short circuit the mind and move the emotions with shortcuts. Thus folk culture is not generally a preservative force for great Biblical doctrine.

There Are Positive Potentials of Fine Culture

The positive potentials of fine culture include the preservation of what we might call the “life of the mind.” Fine culture is more likely than folk culture to inject into the stream of society the commitment to think hard and think clearly. It is more likely than folk culture to keep the intellect from atrophying. It is especially crucial that Christians not surrender the life of the mind to the secular world, first, because it belongs to God, and he commanded us to love him with our minds, and, second, because we will lose succeeding generations if we do not have intellectually credible expressions of faith to pass on to them.

Further, fine culture has the potential of preserving the very concepts of truth and excellence and beauty as objective ideals rooted in God as our Absolute. Folk culture tends always to exalt what works. It is intrinsically pragmatic and colloquial and does not measure its achievements in terms of objective, absolute ideals, but generally in terms of wide appeal and practical effect. Fine culture tends to march the beat of a drummer other than mass appeal or practical effect. At its best it strives to create images of excellence and beauty and truth that echo more faithfully the ultimate excellence of God. Fine culture thus has the potential (if not contemporary success) of helping preserve the real complexities of truth and thus guarding against the intrinsic tendency of folk culture toward over-simplification and eventual distortion.

Fine culture has the potential of touching some emotions that folk culture will not touch. Folk culture tends toward what can be commonly shared and therefore minimizes what is rare. However, some emotions that belong to God are rare and profound and may be awakened and carried best through the expressions of fine culture. For example, there are probably some senses of grandeur that find preservation and expression best in some grand and magnificent artistic statements that are not part of folk culture.

There Are Positive Potentials of Folk Culture

The positive potentials of folk culture include meeting people where they are in order to communicate. Folk culture affirms the importance of building bridges of shareable experience. It is a go-and-tell mentality rather than a come-and-see mentality. It goes the extra mile to make its vision accessible to the average person.

Folk culture keeps the truth clear that elite groups of intellectuals and artists that look with contempt on the common man and his needs and tastes are not admirable persons no matter how accomplished their talents. Folk culture has the potential of reminding us that God must have loved the common people because he made so many of them. Folk culture is by nature incarnational: it clothes its claims with the skin of ordinary people and affirms implicitly the value of getting through to the mind and heart of the masses.

Folk culture at its best has the potential of touching emotions that fine culture will not generally touch. Thus folk culture honors the preciousness of average wonders. Falling in love, taking a walk, eating a good meal, talking to a friend, swimming in the ocean, having a baby, planting a garden - all these are likely to be the subject of folk culture creations and communications. It helps us not to neglect ordinary beauty.

All We Do Is on a Continuum Between Folk and Fine

In the church all that we do falls somewhere on the continuum between fine culture and folk culture: our music, our architecture, our furnishings, our dress, our written materials, our preaching and teaching, our conversation between services, etc.

We Should Take the Strengths and Weaknesses of Both into Account in Our Planning

In thinking about our worship forms and about the general tone and atmosphere of our church, we should take the possible weaknesses and potential strengths of fine culture and folk culture into account. We will hopefully be able to affirm all that is good in both cultures and find a way both to “be ourselves” (which is partly inevitable) and be what we need to be to honor the excellence and truth and beauty of God and reach out to all the kinds of people God is calling us to touch.

This will be an Ongoing Process, Not a Once for All Discovery

An Effort to Capture Our Worship and Music Ethos

(A letter to an inquiring candidate)

John Piper

July, 1996

Dear John (not his real name),

I am just reading Harold Best's *Music through the Eyes of Faith*. I am finding it unusually provocative and mainly very good. What has moved me most is his deep grasp of the gospel and his profoundly pastoral grip on the way love figures into making music and thinking about music. His amazingly broad sympathies delicately mingled with a plea for quality and authenticity are rare, as far as I can see. . . .

We have a broad spectrum of tastes and desires at Bethlehem. We are an urban church - not strictly inner city, but center-city with professional, university, and poor urban folk to minister to. We have aspirations of being on the cutting edge of caring about racial reconciliation (one of our ministries has funded over 130 transracial adoptions, and my wife and I adopted an African American daughter). Most of the staff live in the urban setting, and we love giving our lives away in missions. This is the spirit in which we want to worship. There is, we hope, a radical edge to our life and mission that makes some "fine culture" folks feel a bit out of their element.

Not that we reject "fine culture," but, rather, there is simply a different ethos to singing conceived as wartime exultation in preparation for battle and peacetime relaxation at orchestra hall. I preached a sermon one time called, "Ambushing Satan with Song," from 2 Chronicles 20:22 which says, "And when they began singing and praising, the LORD set ambushes against the sons of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; so they were routed."

I still love that image. If the choir is not with me in the battle for souls and for truth and for spreading a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for all people, I feel betrayed by the shimmering robes.

We have soared with Rutter, and we have blown the lid off with every electrical instrument with "Let the Walls Fall Down" and "Shine Jesus Shine," plus shook the building with ten black church choirs and ours.

We need someone who will not just cope with our diversity, but love it - urban/suburban,

old/young, fine/folk, black/white/Asian (though we are overwhelmingly white at the time), intellectual/simple, etc. This is something that I hear in Harold Best's book. I think these words are very perceptive:

There is nothing un- or anti-Christian about any kind of music. By the same token there is no such thing as Christian music. . . . (p. 52). Indiscriminate musical choice for the sake of attracting everybody means that there is no real centeredness, no practical authenticity. At first blush, this sounds like a refutation of everything said and defended so far about pluralism. It is not. It is, however a refutation of faceless pluralism, given these facts: (1) the best pluralists will always have limited, not infinite, choice; (2) pluralism never substitutes for the pursuit of excellence; (3) pluralism is the act of discovering and relating to the centeredness of others from the vantage point of one's own centeredness. . . . What [churches] cannot afford to do is to clone each other in order to keep up with each other, vying for souls. Rather, church 'x,' out of Spirit-driven conscience, chooses a certain musical profile, a certain combination of centeredness and diversity. Church 'y' goes another way with the same integrity (*Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, Harold Best, [San Francisco: Harper, 1993], p. 190).

So what I have been trying to do is give you a flavor of our profile and centeredness and some of the diversity involved. It is almost impossible to do this without weeks together. But such is life. God will take what I have said, and as imperfect as it is, use it to guide us.

It might help to let you read the ad we published as part of our search for a lead worshipper.

ASSOCIATE PASTOR FOR WORSHIP AND MUSIC, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN. The Mission of our 1,000 folks is to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples. We are Calvinistic in theology, baptistic in polity, and charismatic in our affections, and driven by the truth that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him" (Christian Hedonism)! We are committed to old and new, fine and folk, depth and simplicity, head and heart, design and spontaneity, awe, and intimacy - with unremitting God-centeredness, intensity, and authenticity. We aim to be Bible-saturated, Spirit-filled, soul-winning, culture-confronting. Age and ethnic diversity matter. Worship leadership means worshipping contagiously in front of others. Elder qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 expected.

For Christ and His Kingdom,

John Piper

“Take Heed How You Hear!”

Ten Practical Preparations for Hearing
the Word of God on Sunday Morning

A Meditation on Luke 8:18

Take heed then how you hear; for to him who has will more be given, and from him who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.

Pray that God Would Give You a Good and Honest Heart

The heart we need is a work of God. That’s why we pray for it. “I will give you a new heart” (Ezekiel 36:26). “I will give them a heart to know Me” (Jeremiah 24:7). Let’s pray, “O Lord, give me a heart for you. Give me a good and honest heart. Give me a soft and receptive heart. Give me a humble and meek heart. Give me an fruitful heart.”

Meditate on the Word of God

“O taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8). On Saturday night, read some delicious portion of your Bible with a view to stirring up hunger for God. This is the appetizer for Sunday morning’s meal.

Purify Your Mind by Turning Away from Worldly Entertainment

“Putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:21). It astonishes me how many Christians watch the same banal, empty, silly, trivial, titillating, suggestive, immodest TV shows that most unbelievers watch. This makes us small and weak and worldly and inauthentic in worship. Instead, turn off the television on Saturday night and read something true and great and beautiful and pure and honorable and excellent and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8). Your heart will unshriveled and be able to feel greatness again.

Trust in the Truth That You Already Have

The hearing of the Word of God that fails during trial has no root (Luke 8:13). What is the root we need? It is trust. Jeremiah 17:7-8 says, “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose trust is the LORD. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream.” Trusting in the truth is the best way to prepare yourself to

receive more.

Rest Long Enough Saturday Night to be Alert and Hopeful Sunday Morning

“All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). I am not laying down any law here. I am saying: there are Saturday night ways that ruin Sunday morning worship. Don’t be enslaved by them. Without sufficient sleep, our minds are dull, our emotions are flat, our proneness to depression is higher, and our fuses are short. My counsel: decide when you must get up on Sunday in order to have time to eat, get dressed, pray and meditate on the Word, prepare the family, and travel to church; and then compute backward eight hours and be sure that you are in bed 15 minutes before that. Read your Bible in bed and fall asleep with the Word of God in your mind. I especially exhort parents to teach teenagers that Saturday is not the night to stay out late with friends. If there is a special late night, make it Friday. It is a terrible thing to teach children that worship is so optional that it doesn’t matter if you are exhausted when you come.

Forebear One Another Sunday Morning Without Grumbling and Criticism.

“They grumbled in their tents; they did not listen to the voice of the LORD” (Psalm 106:25). Sunday morning grumbling and controversy and quarreling can ruin a worship service for a family. When there is something you are angry about or some conflict that you genuinely think needs to be talked about, forbear. Of course if you are clearly the problem and need to apologize, do it as quickly as you can (Matthew 5:23-24). But if you are fuming because of the children’s or spouse’s delinquency, forbear, that is, be slow to anger and quick to listen (James 1:19). In worship, open yourself to God’s exposing the log in your own eye. It may be that all of you will be humbled and chastened so that no serious conflict is necessary.

Be Meek and Teachable When You Come

“Receive with meekness the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:21). Meekness and teachability are not gullibility. You have your Bible and you have your brain. Use them. But if we come with a chip on our shoulders and a suspicion of the preaching, week after week, we will not hear the Word of God. Meekness is a humble openness to God’s truth with a longing to be changed by it.

Be Still as You Enter the Room and Focus Your Mind’s Attention and Heart’s Affection on God

“Be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10). As we enter the sanctuary, let us come on the lookout for God, and leave on the lookout for people. Come with a quiet passion to seek God and his power. We will not be an unfriendly church if we are aggressive in our pursuit of God during the prelude and aggressive in our pursuit of visitors during the postlude.

Think Earnestly About What Is Sung and Prayed and Preached

“Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature” (1 Corinthians 14:20). So Paul says to Timothy, “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Timothy 2:7). Anything worth hearing is worth thinking about. If you would take heed how you hear, think about what you hear.

Desire the Truth of God’s Word More Than You Desire Riches or Food

“Like newborn babies, desire the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Peter 2:2). As you sit quietly and pray and meditate on the text and the songs, remind yourself of what Psalm 19:10-11 says about the Words of God: “More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.”