

Introduction

Worship is about God. Worshipers gather to celebrate His glory, beauty, and mighty acts of salvation in the world. Worship is a genuine encounter with the Triune God that takes place at His invitation.

The Christian worshipping community gathers in response to God: to celebrate who He is and what He has done in the world through Christ, to hear and respond to His Word, to allow God's transformation process to work in their lives, and to be sent out as God's people to carry the good news of Christ and His kingdom into the world. Through Christian worship, the congregation experiences God's presence, dramatically reenacts His story, participates in connection with the worshipping community that transcends time and space, and becomes formed as God's people.

Given the central nature of worship in the congregation's relationship with the Triune God, it is important that anyone who plans or leads worship fully understand the significance of worship: biblically, theologically, doxologically, liturgically, and pastorally. In turn, the church leadership has the responsibility to teach the congregation every aspect of their amazing encounter with God in which they participate every week.

Biblical Foundations

The content of Christian worship is based in the biblical narrative. In turn, worship forms the biblical narrative within the life of the congregation. Worship proclaims God's mighty acts of salvation. Worship connects the congregation to the past, present, and future aspects of the biblical narrative and the Christ event. By incorporating the Christian calendar into the weekly

worship experience, the congregation can journey through and experience every part of God's biblical narrative each year.¹

Christian worship in certain ways parallels Old Testament worship which celebrated how God delivered His people from bondage and brought them into the Promised Land. Christian worship celebrates how God, through Christ, has delivered His people from bondage to sin and has brought them into His present and future kingdom.² Through the Eucharist, the congregation also remembers and participates in God's fulfillment, through Christ, of the covenant He began with Abraham.³

Worship is more than a remembrance and celebration of a past event. Webber raises a biblically important question: "How does the God who acted in the past act now in our worship?"⁴ Through worship, the congregation participates with and responds to the God who has redeemed them and who desires to continue sanctifying and restoring His image in them. Through worship, the congregation experiences God's invitation to respond to His Word through a desire for transformation and deeper holy living.

Theological Foundations

God's immanence is experienced in worship. The worshiping community remembers that God came to live among them, in Christ, and through His Holy Spirit now lives within them. The Eucharist is one way for the congregation to experience Christ's immanence in worship. Another way is for the person reading the Gospel to stand in the midst of the congregation.⁵ The act of

¹ Jonathan A. Powers, "Calendar" (PowerPoint, Course WO 510, Asbury Theological Seminary, Spring 2018), slide 7.

² Jonathan A. Powers, "Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship" (PowerPoint, Course WO 510, Asbury Theological Seminary, Spring 2018), slide 4.

³ Powers, "Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship," slide 11.

⁴ Robert Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 17.

⁵ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.), 93.

bringing the Gospel physically to the people is a tangible reminder that Christ is literally within their midst. Because reading the Gospel while standing among the people was a practice of the early church,⁶ this act also symbolically connects today's worshipping congregation with the early church congregations and the disciples who followed Jesus in His earthly ministry.

The celebration of God's immanence through Christ and the Holy Spirit needs to be balanced with a reverence of God's transcendence. Stookey reminds worshipers that when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11), this imagery evokes the closeness of a shepherd and the transcendence of "I AM."⁷ When worship is structured to focus on God and His mighty acts of salvation, the congregation will experience His immanence and His transcendence.

Worship also celebrates the eschatological dimensions of the biblical narrative and offers a glimpse of Christ's future rule.⁸ The worshipping community is shaped by its eschatology.⁹ When the Christian calendar is allowed to be an integral part of worship, the congregation moves through God's biblical narrative with an awareness of the future dimensions of God's kingdom. The season of Advent becomes both the beginning of the Christian year and the end. The first day of Advent is not only preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth; it is also a remembrance that His second coming has not yet taken place, but will.¹⁰ The Eucharist is likewise a dual celebration of what God has done through Christ, and of the kingdom that is yet to come.

When the congregation gathers for worship, they enter into a visible and invisible gathering of the church that is immediate and spans eternity. Cherry reminds worshipers that in Job 38:7,

⁶ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, 93.

⁷ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 64.

⁸ Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New*, 20.

⁹ Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, 21.

¹⁰ Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, 121.

God reveals that worship was already taking place as He “laid the foundation of the earth.”¹¹

Worship is also taking place in heaven now, and will continue forever.¹² The worship experience brings aspects of the past and the future into the present.¹³

When a congregation enters worship, they join the worshipers around God’s throne in heaven to celebrate Jesus, the Lamb (Revelation 5:11-14). This heavenly worship includes an immediate and eschatological sense. Additionally, the worshiping congregation joins fellow believers around the world. The congregation continues the same tradition and flow of worship that has taken place throughout church history. Worship is not just an act of one local body of the church; rather, it is a continuous act of the entire church since the beginning. It is the local body that makes the larger cosmic and earthly church visible.¹⁴

To experience the fullness of worship, a congregation needs a complete theology of atonement: creation, fall, redemption, new creation.¹⁵ Without this complete understanding of God’s story, the worship experience might focus only on the crucifixion without celebrating the resurrection life. Worship needs to lead the congregation through confession and into peace.¹⁶ Worshipers need to experience the full Christ event. A complete theology of atonement prompts the worshiping congregation to celebrate and live the fullness of God’s story.

While God’s kingdom and new creation will receive fulfillment in the eschaton, that new kingdom life has already begun with the resurrection of Christ. Sanctification and transformation on an individual and corporate level are part of the new creation that has already begun. In

¹¹ Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 4.

¹² Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*, 4.

¹³ Stookey, *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church*, 28-29.

¹⁴ Jonathan A. Powers, “Defining Worship” (PowerPoint, Course WO 510, Asbury Theological Seminary, Spring 2018), slide 6.

¹⁵ Jonathan A. Powers, “Brief History of Christian Worship” (PowerPoint, Course WO 510, Asbury Theological Seminary, Spring 2018), slide 8.

¹⁶ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, 101-102.

worship, the Word and the response need to invite the process of sanctification and transformation. The sending out is a reminder that as the congregation goes into the world, they have the opportunity to bring the kingdom of God wherever they go.

Doxological Foundations

God is the focus of worship. God created people to delight in Him and to be in relationship with Him. In worship, the congregation comes together to focus on God's beauty.¹⁷ God-centered worship is, by definition, not human-centered. In planning worship, the church leadership needs to question what aspects have become more about people and less about God, as well as how to recalibrate worship so God is the focus.

The church leadership also needs to help the congregation understand that in worship, they are meeting with God corporately as His people. Worship is an encounter that God has initiated for the congregation.¹⁸ They need to prepare ahead of time and expect to encounter God in worship. Webber encourages worshipers to learn how to focus on the Trinity, so they can "behold God in all his glory."¹⁹ The four-fold flow of worship facilitates that encounter, in the way people assemble to meet with God, hear from God through His Word, respond to what God has spoken to them, and depart to serve, bearing the spiritual transformation of that encounter with God.

It is important to consider the worship space, including entrance and exit paths, to see how space design can become more God-focused and less distracting. Art and other symbols (for example, candles and banners) can be used effectively when these symbols direct the congregation's attention to God and prepare them for an encounter with Him. Symbols of worship also remind the congregation of the mystery of God.

¹⁷ Powers, "Defining Worship," slide 7.

¹⁸ Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*, 4.

¹⁹ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, 99-100.

Today's congregation can learn from the medieval church about honoring the mystery of God and the power of a visual connection to God's glory. The medieval church emphasized art, architecture, and gestures to draw a largely illiterate congregation into the story of God to focus on His glory.²⁰ While much of this visual focus was lost in the Reformation, the worshipping congregation today could benefit from an appropriate use of visual symbols that usher people into a genuine encounter with God's glory and mystery.

The four-fold structure of worship is doxological in every aspect. In the gathering, the congregation prepares to encounter God's glory. Through the Word, God's glory is proclaimed and remembered. The response is an invitation to give thanks for God's glory, as well as to become immersed in His glorious presence at the Communion table. In the sending out, the congregation prepares to reflect God's glory and point the world toward Him.

Liturgical Foundations

In a worship context, "liturgy" refers to the work of worship, the literal words and actions. Jesus is the head liturgist who leads the congregation. The church leadership needs to invite the congregation to join Jesus in the liturgy of worship.²¹

I have heard people express the fear that too much structure will hinder the Holy Spirit. Yet a biblically focused structure of worship invites the Holy Spirit to work in the congregation. Structure also helps the congregation "form holy habits."²² From the earliest years of Christian worship, and the Jewish traditions that preceded them, structure intentionally facilitated the congregation's worship encounters with God.²³ Webber demonstrates that the flow of worship is

²⁰ Powers, "Brief History of Christian Worship," slide 21.

²¹ Reference to Robin Parry in Powers, "Defining Worship," slide 4.

²² Jonathan A. Powers, "Fourfold Structure" (PowerPoint, Course WO 510, Asbury Theological Seminary, Spring 2018), slide 2.

²³ Powers, "Brief History of Christian Worship," slide 5.

given from God: He revealed Himself (Word) and came to live with people (Table).²⁴ Therefore, the structure and flow of worship “tells and acts out the Christ-event.”²⁵ Structure invites God’s revelation and congregational response at a deeper level.²⁶

In worship, the congregation re-enacts God’s story and His acts of salvation, through praise, prayer, reading of scripture, proclamation of the Word, the experience of the Eucharist, and in the sending out of the congregation in the way Jesus sent out His first disciples (Matthew 10:7-8, 28:19-20). Each part of the worship service should in some way tell God’s story of salvation. Even the sending out, perhaps the easiest portion of worship to overlook, should represent the story of how the congregation goes into the world.²⁷

The use of symbolism and dramatic re-enactment helps the congregation to live out God’s story in worship. Dramatic re-enactment is enhanced through the use of drama and other arts.²⁸ The congregation participates dramatically through opportunities to read responsively, worship with their physical senses through gestures and postures, and come to the Eucharist table. The church leadership can help the congregation understand the significance of certain gestures. For example, standing for the gospel reading is not a practice done by rote. It symbolizes that the congregation stands spiritually alongside the people who gathered around Jesus when He spoke during His earthly ministry.

By participating fully in God’s story that unfolds through congregational worship, the people become more deeply formed as the church,²⁹ a formation that begins from the moment of gathering and greeting.³⁰ Worship design should include overtly participatory elements that

²⁴ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, 45, 54, 57.

²⁵ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, 45.

²⁶ Powers, “Fourfold Structure,” slide 2.

²⁷ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, 102-103.

²⁸ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, 183.

²⁹ Powers, “Defining Worship,” slide 8.

³⁰ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, 46.

invite a tangible response, such as coming to the Lord's Table or to the altar. However, it is also important for the congregation to understand the response inherent in hearing from God through the sermon and engaging with God when one person is praying on behalf of the congregation.³¹

The sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism are part of the liturgical flow of worship. These sacraments are opportunities for the congregation to encounter the presence of God. Sacraments are also a dramatic reenactment of the gospel story.³²

Staples describes the different images of the Eucharist in which the congregation participates.³³ The congregation remembers what God has sacrificed and celebrates God's victory in Christ. The congregation allows God to work death (of old ways) and new life in them, as they experience fellowship together and anticipate the coming heavenly banquet (Matthew 26:29). Through the Eucharist, the congregation remembers that all they have to offer in the world is Christ.³⁴

Matthew's Gospel account of the Baptism of Jesus shows the presence of the Trinity in Baptism (Matthew 3:13-17). As today's congregation experiences the sacrament of Baptism, they encounter God in the Trinity. Staples reminds worshipers that Baptism is a significant part of Pentecost (Acts 2:37-42) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20).³⁵

Pastoral Foundations

Worship is more than a one-hour event on Sunday. Worship is the central focus of the life of the church.³⁶ The worship experience reorients the congregation toward God. Worship forms the congregation as "a *new* community with a new life."³⁷

³¹ Powers, "Defining Worship," slide 6.

³² Powers, "Brief History of Christian Worship," slides 9-10.

³³ Rob L. Staples, *Outward Sign and Inward Grace* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1991), 229.

³⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 35.

³⁵ Staples, *Outward Sign and Inward Grace*, 119.

³⁶ Powers, "Defining Worship," slide 7; Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, 7.

³⁷ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 27.

Through worship, God transforms the congregation for holy living. The sending-out aspect of worship prepares the congregation to live in the kingdom of God, to serve God in the world,³⁸ and to carry out Jesus' works of mercy and piety. Communion creates a space for God's sanctifying power to work within the congregation as individuals and as a corporate body. Pastorally, it is important to help the congregation understand how right praise leads to right living.

If a congregation is not taught the biblical basis of worship, the significance of structure and flow, the reason various elements are included in worship, and the formation of the body of Christ that takes place during worship, the congregation may not understand the spiritual encounter with God in which they regularly participate. The whole congregation is part of the worship meeting with God, whether or not the people understand. It is vital for the church leadership to teach the congregation the significance of worship.

Through catechesis, the early church helped the congregation understand the significance of worship.³⁹ Today, it is tempting for the church to disciple the congregation solely during worship. The risk is turning the sanctuary into a classroom, which has roots in the Reformation,⁴⁰ rather than setting up separate times and spaces for catechesis and keeping worship focused as a congregational encounter with God. While teaching about worship is vital, the focus of worship must be biblical and centered on the Triune God.

Pastoring the people in worship means helping them enter and move through the process of encountering God. Pastoring also means helping the people identify and bring their unique gifts to the worship experience, such as art, writing, drama, and dance. Pastoring people in worship

³⁸ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship*, 54.

³⁹ Powers, "Brief History of Christian Worship," slide 9.

⁴⁰ Powers, "Brief History of Christian Worship," slide 35.

requires contextual sensitivity, patience, the cultivation of a loving and healing atmosphere, and context-appropriate means of communicating God’s love and His story.⁴¹

Conclusion

Worship is at the heart of God’s relationship with His people. Worship is a truly transformational encounter with the living Triune God. As the congregation engages fully – with body, mind, emotions, and spirit – in the worship experience, the congregation is formed as a people and increasingly transformed into the image of Christ, to actively and intentionally be His light in the world.

Worship is a time and place where the church needs to invest in its people. Worship is where people will encounter God, discover who He is and what He has done in their lives and in the world, connect with the body of Christ around the world, across time, and even into heaven, and live daily in the reality of the kingdom of God. Helping the congregation to learn and grow in the significance of worship is a pressing need for the church.

⁴¹ Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New*, 26-28.

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