

Vertical Habits: Missional Churches at Worship

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INTRODUCTION: The Problem(s)

- Fuzziness about worship's purpose in general

George Barna: "Most of the church people who fight about their musical preference do so because they don't understand the relationship between music, communication, God and worship. Church leaders foster the problem by focusing on how to please people with music or how to offer enough styles of music to meet everyone's tastes rather dealing with the underlying issues of limited interest in, comprehension of, and investment in fervent worship of a holy, deserving God." Barna also stated that although music is important in the worship process, it is often elevated beyond its rightful place in the worship effort. "Music is just a tool meant to enable people to express themselves to God, yet we sometimes spend more time arguing over the tool than over the product and purpose of the tool." The Barna study discovered that among the key worship issues is that church-going adults and Protestant Senior Pastors do not share a common perception of the most important outcome of worship. Congregants were most likely to understand worship as activity undertaken for their personal benefit (47%) while Senior Pastors described the purpose of worship as connecting with God (41%) or experiencing His presence (30%). Only three out of ten church-going adults (29%) indicated that they view worship as something that is focused primarily on God. One out of every five attenders admitted that they had no idea what the most important outcome of worship is.

- Lack of a unifying (and clarifying) metaphor for worship or understanding about worship across worship styles

PARENTING TODDLERS, BILLY GRAHAM, and THE POPE: The Language Analogy

- Our language not only reflects, but also shapes our thoughts and emotions.
- Healthy language does not come naturally, but has to be learned.
- Conversion and growth in faith are, in part, a matter of coming to learn a new language.

INTRODUCING "VERTICAL HABITS"

This "vertical habits" project explores one way of approaching the topic of faithful, biblically grounded worship. It is not the only way to approach it. And it doesn't address every pressing issue. But its advantages commend it as a good starting point for our work.

1. **Learning to talk is one of life's greatest miracles.** But even for toddlers, healthy speech habits don't come naturally. Young children need to learn to say "thank you," "I'm sorry," and "please." Parents need to prompt and reinforce these basic conversational moves. Eventually they become part of the way toddlers see the world and navigate relationships. Indeed, there are few moments quite as sweet as hearing a sudden, unprompted "thanks mommy and daddy." . . . *I love you. . . I'm sorry. . . Thank you. . . Help. . .* Words like these are the building blocks of healthy relationships. Every close relationship depends on them. When they are left unpracticed, marriages fail and friendships disintegrate.
2. **Faithful speech is also central to the Christian life.** For one of the most provocative and inspiring word pictures in all of scripture is that God is related to the church like a marriage partner. The God of the Bible is not just interested in having us contemplate him, or appease him. This God is interested in the give and take of faithful life together, with good communication right at the center of it. Ample evidence for this claim is the Bible's

songbook, the 150 Psalms, each of which expresses at least one essential communicational habit for a people in a covenant relationship with God.

3. **One of the ways we learn good communication habits with God is by participating in public worship.** When we gather for worship, the church invites us to join together say to God, “We love you. We’re sorry. Come again—we’re listening. Help. Thank you. I will serve you.” In fact, some orders of worship pretty much follow this pattern, ensuring a healthy balanced diet of faithful speech. To use a phrase from Thomas G. Long’s recent book *Testimony*, worship is “God’s language school.” As with toddlers, these speech habits take practice. But the discipline is worth it, forming us over time to express our deepest fears, hopes, and joys in profound ways. As I travel, I love to hear the prayers of people from different congregations and traditions. So often they echo language learned first in worship.

4. The challenge is that on any given Sunday, each of us comes to church with something different to say. Some of us come to church ready to tell God “thank you!” Others of us want to cry “why?” Others are ready to say, “I’m sorry”—though we all need to. To say it another way, some of us come ready to sing Psalm 100, others Psalm 13, and all us, if we’re honest, need to speak Psalm 51. **Good worship services make room for these essential words. They help each of us express our particular experience, but they also help us practice forms of speech we’re still growing into.** This is one reason public worship is so important—it challenges us to practice forms of faithful speech to God that we are not likely to try on our own. Authentic worship, like toddler talk, expresses who we are and forms what we are becoming.

Sample habits in a good relationship

1. *Love You.*
2. *Sorry.*
3. *Why?*
4. *Come again? (I’m listening)*
5. *Help.*
6. *Thank You.*
7. *What Can I Do?*
8. *Bless You.*

Elements of Worship

(We could add others, as well)

5. The good news is that worship isn’t a one-sided conversation. We talk to God, but God also speaks to us. Through scripture and sermons that echo scripture, God comforts, challenges, corrects, and convicts us. Through water, bread and wine, God blesses, assures, and nourishes us. On top of that, even when we speak, it is God’s Holy Spirit who is at work, prompting, encouraging, and teaching us (Gal. 4:6). So next time you go to worship, look for some toddlers and the parents who are teaching them to talk. It’s not a bad picture of what worship is about for all of us—“for children of God we are” (1 John 3:1).

DEEPER THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

1. This orientation draws on the primary analogy we find in scripture for picturing how God and human beings related—the analogy of intimate interpersonal relationship. This comparison is:
 - a. deeply biblical
 - b. rich in potential—it turns everyone’s notion of ideal relationship into a *potential* teaching opportunity,
 - c. risky, because of the over-familiarity of relational language

The rhetoric of Judaeo-Christian worship is that of interpersonal encounter, in which the texts we speak and sing serve to enact the divine-human relationship. The primary metaphors used to describe worship are metaphors of interpersonal communication. The biblical psalms are often scripts of conversations. Often they express prayer to God, words to God. At times, they depict proclamation, words from God. Petitions alternate

with oracles. The psalms teach us, to use Walter Brueggemann's phrase, that "biblical faith is uncompromisingly and unembarrassedly dialogical" (*The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, Fortress Press, 68).

Psalm 12

- begins with the plea: "Help, O LORD, for there is no longer anyone who is godly,"
- which soon is interrupted by an oracle: "Because the poor are despoiled . . . I will rise up, says the Lord."

This pattern of alternation depicts what Raymond Jacques Tournay has called the "prophetic liturgy of the temple" (*Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms: The Prophetic Liturgy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

PSALM 81 (one of scads of examples)

→ Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob.

Raise a song, sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp. . .

- ↓ I hear a voice I had not known: "I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket. In distress you called, and I rescued you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Hear, O my people, while I admonish you; O Israel, if you would but listen to me

The Lord said to me, "Assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on the earth, and may teach their children so". . .

--Deut. 4:10

Worship in the Christian tradition has not been historically conceived as merely:

- meditation upon a profound idea (though it may be packed with profound ideas),
- generating a particular emotional state (though it may be profoundly emotional),
- an event designed to attract enough people to pay the church's mortgage (though it may be attractive),
or
- an aesthetic "high" (though it may be profoundly beautiful).

Rather, worship has been conceived primarily as the "enactment of a divine-human relationship," an "interpersonal encounter" between God and the gathered community.

Liturgy, like the biblical Psalms, is like a script of this interpersonal conversation. This is essentially true in most congregations, including both "liturgical" and "non-liturgical" ones. (What distinguishes congregations on this spectrum is whether their patterns for worship are simple or elaborate, formal or informal, fixed or variable, historic or intentionally not historic—not whether, in most cases, they are understood in terms of the metaphor of divine-human interpersonal conversation).

Worship in any setting, if it is Christian, needs to feature both listening and speaking. At the heart of Christian worship is the reading (and echoing) of scripture, honest prayer, and symbolic gift exchanges between us and the God who made and redeemed us. Everything else—music, art, drama, etc. is simply a means to these ends, not an end itself. What worship needs in most settings is simply to get the means and ends straightened out.

2. "VERTICALITY." Most of these moves are "vertical." They happen between the triune God and us. Note: The term "vertical" is metaphorical. Indeed, God is not only "above us" but also "alongside of us," at work "within us" and the foundation or bulwark "beneath us." Still, the pervasive biblical imagery calls us to imagine a vertical relationship in which we "set our minds on things above" (Col. 3.) *Traction point: This is especially important in a culture where worship service easily become "horizontalized."* This project is an implicit critique of this tendency.

3. PUBLIC WORSHIP AS FORMATIVE. **At it's best, worship doesn't just reflect where we are. It moves us further along as we grow in the life of faith.** To say it another way, worship is part of discipleship and spiritual formation. The claim is not that worship is the most essential part of spiritual formation (though some would say this). BUT, even the mild form of this assertion does not represent how a vast stretch of congregations operate. AND, this idea will entail changes in many congregations. *Traction point: This implicitly critiques an approach to*

worship that is essentially expressivist, in which worship merely expresses what a congregation is feeling at a given moment. Worship both expresses and forms a congregation. It is part of growth, discipleship, training in righteousness.

4. **HABITS.** The word 'habits' is out-of-vogue, but crucial. As in human relationships, vibrant 'moments' might be memorable, but it is deep-seated habits that sustain us for faithful life-long discipleship. Further, habits typically come to us through bodily participation. We learn by doing, by practice. Faith impulses, like basketball free-throws and piano scales, are learned by practice.

5. **LITURGY AND LIFE.** Worship is intimately related with life in the world. In worship, we practice certain attitudes or speech patterns that we need to take with us into the world.

Think of what mature Christian instinctive response we would want to:

*the temptation to cheat on taxes	I'M SORRY
*a beautiful sunset	PRAISE YOU
*confusion about how	COME AGAIN?

And this worship-life connection must not be limited to the arena of human effort (where the focus is on how hard we work at our worship). The key connecting point (see Long, p. 40) is that the living and active God is at work through both liturgy and life.

Further, the worship/life connection suffers from overly simplistic metaphors: worship as battery charge, pit stop, pep rally for the real game. . . Rather, see Sunday as "prism" or depth dimension of daily practice. Christian worship as the practices of the Christian life "condensed" or "super-concentrated."

Traction point: This approach is an implicit protest of approaches that disconnect worship and daily life.

6. **The biblical Psalms** are the foundational mentor and guide in this vocabulary and grammar for worship. The Lord's Prayer is a mandate to practice many of these moves. Each of these speech patterns are modified and shaped by the fruits of the Spirit.

7. **Every one of these vertical habits is reconfigured because of crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus**, especially when we see Jesus himself participate in them ("take this cup from me," "why have you forsaken me"), and when we realize that the ascended Jesus continues to participate in many of them, as he "ever lives to pray for us." (Heb.)

8. **These words are—on one level—only as valuable as the inner dispositions and actions that they both reflect and form.** If the words don't hook-up with our inner selves, they are empty words, and we are open to the charge of hypocrisy. Yet while this must be acknowledged and remembered at all costs, this point can also be overstated. Speech patterns still shape us even when we don't mean them (yet). Most speech patterns are texts we grown into. And overstating this point can be an excuse to simply downplay discipleship altogether.

9. Part of the attractiveness of this metaphor is that people long for healthy speech habits in human relationships. We know (painfully well) when healthy speech isn't practiced, when it is too shallow to bear the weight of our longing for transparency and intimacy. That human experience is a **point-of-contact** for exploring this theme.

10. **Taken too far, this approach could suggest that public worship is merely utilitarian, that it is only for "formation."** We'll need to hold each other accountable to prevent this from happening.

11. **This approach can't exhaust the mystery of worship.** Finally, the Holy Spirit prays in and for us with sighs too deep for words.