

On Divine Glory: An Expanded Conversation on the Conference Theme

J. Witvliet
Calvin Institute of Christian Worship
Calvin Symposium on Worship

January 2007

This theme arises out of the basic conviction that long-term worship renewal is best sustained not merely by attention to technique or style, but rather by attention to the triune God we worship. Indeed, we should worry a lot about the mechanics, style, and techniques of worship, but mostly in terms of how adequate they are to fittingly proclaim and approach this particular God.

I. A Pervasive Biblical Theme

“God’s glory” is certainly a central dimension of worship. It is, indeed, “one of the master images that helps to tell the story of the Bible” (*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*). . . . It is a central motif in Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, as well as throughout nearly every contemporary songbook.

Exodus 24, 33, 40
I Sam. 4: Ichabod.. “the glory has departed from Israel”
Psalm 24: “Who is the king of glory?”
Isaiah 40: “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed”
Luke 1:14: “glory to God in the highest”
Transfiguration narratives
John 1:14: “we have seen his glory”
2 Cor. 4:6 . . . “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”
2 Cor. 4:17: “. . . an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”
Col. 3:4: “. . . you also will appear with him in glory”
I Peter 5:1: “. . . a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed”

Elements of a biblical definition of glory:

- one part weightiness, (Hebrew: *kabod*)
- one part luminosity,
- one part benevolence or goodness,
- one part transparency
-
- Very close to splendor, majesty, radiance, doxology (Greek: *doxa*)
- Linked with other attributes, including holiness, incomprehensibility, inexhaustibleness
- Links with “glorify” as a synonym for worship
- Evokes terms like effulgence, resplendence
- Associated with images of fire, light, cloud, shining face
- Associated with reputation, recognition, fame, prestige

[though I think that there may be some pollution of the language of glory here that may have more to do with Zeus than Yahweh, in which a little of bit what used to be called “vain-glory” gets loaded up on the term “glory”]. (See forthcoming notes on CICW website by Nathan Bierma)

II. Worship and Glory: An ‘Iconic’ View of Worship

One thing I have asked of the Lord. . . that I will behold the beauty of the Lord (Psalm 27:4)

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. (Psalm 63:2)

Think of worship as a window. In worship, to use the words of Psalm 63, we “behold God’s power and glory” (vs. 2). In Word and Sacrament, we are given a view of “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Cor. 4:6).

What should we attend to in worship?

The temptation we face as worship leaders is that we will spend so much energy dressing this window, repairing this window, or cleaning this window that we have no time to look through it.

Calvin on sacraments: “Indeed, the believer, when he sees the sacraments with his own eyes, *does not halt at the physical sight of them*, but by those steps (which I have indicated by analogy) rises up in devout contemplation to those lofty mysteries which lie hidden in the sacraments.” (Recall John Calvin on the Lord’s Supper (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.XIV.1). Note: this approach does not dismiss eyesight as an essential action; it doesn’t stop there).

III. Glory as (Perpetually) Endangered?

1. One problem is precisely how common a theme it is. We sing the word “glory” so often that we become immune to all it means. It simply joins words like “amen” and “hallelujah” as part of the jargon of the church’s worship life. If the word “glory” were suddenly deleted from any given (contemporary or traditional) songbook, it could be hard to find something to sing next Sunday.

2. Then there is a persistent temptation we all face in twisting worship to ultimately be mostly about us—an especially ironic temptation for those of us who mostly loudly insist that worship is about God (which can so easily become a veiled way of saying ‘that other style of worship is not valid.’) Indeed, it is so easy to walk out of church (or a worship conference) thinking about mostly how interesting the sermon was, how engaging the music and art were, how good or not-so-good the hospitality and fellowship might have been. How many us leave worship genuinely pondering the sheer beauty and glory of God?

3. It is also possible for us to misunderstand God’s glory. As several theologians remind us, it is very easy to bring to the Bible some prior definition of glory that we then read into the Bible.

- Might at times our concept of glory be too exalted—so that we end up seeing Jesus’ life as an exception to the pattern of God’s glory, rather than the very best example of it? Do words like “sublime” and “ethereal” pollute a biblical view of glory, rather than help us express it?
- Alternatively, might at times our concept of glory be so flattened out, that we end up promoting worship practices that have no room in them for grandeur, majesty, awe?
- And what do we make of the gospel of John’s arresting refrain that describes the glory of the cross? What exactly is cruciform glory? And how might it change the way we pray, and sing and worship?

IV. Theological Resources and Refinements

A. Trinitarian context or framework

Generally it is best to thoroughly integrate our praying, thinking, preaching about divine attributes with the doctrine of the Trinity.

John 12: 27-29 "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder.

John 13:31-32 When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. **If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself** and will glorify him at once....

John 17:1-5 After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; **glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you**, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. **I glorified you on earth** by finishing the work that you gave me to do. **So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence** with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

This helps us rethink this famous old dilemma about the language of glory suggesting that God is merely self-serving.

Jonathan Edwards (reflecting on John 13, 17): "God had a design to glorifying himself from eternity, to glorify each person in the Godhead" ("A History of the Work of Redemption")

Jonathan Edwards: "God has appeared glorious to me on account of the Trinity"

B. A language of abundance, delight-in-awe

The structure of this theme in van Maastricht (Reformed scholastic theologian) and in Karl Barth. vol. II, part 1, chapter VI, section 31.3: Glory is like a great outpouring of overflowing light begun in the Trinity extended into all creation, in which we are invited to participate through worship. . . . When we accept Jesus we "slip into creation's choir" (Barth), joining an everlasting/eternal song of glory.

To say God is beautiful "is to say that God has this superior force, this power of attraction, which speaks for itself, which wins and conquers, in the fact that he is beautiful, divinely beautiful, beautiful in His own way, in a way that is His alone, beautiful as the unattainable primal beauty, yet really beautiful. . . . He acts as the One who gives pleasure, creates desire and rewards with enjoyment, because He is the One who is pleasant, desirable, full of enjoyment, because first and last He alone is that which is pleasant desirable and full of enjoyment. . . . **We speak of God's beauty only in explanation of His glory...God's glory is His overflowing self-communicating joy.**"

—Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) vol. II, part 1, chapter VI, section 31.3.

"Doxa is the appearance, form, prestige, splendor, luster or glory of a person or matter manifest in the public domain. . . . **The 'glory of the Lord' is the splendor and brilliance that is inseparably associated with all of God's attributes and his self-revelation in nature and grace, the glorious form in which he everywhere appears to his creatures.** . . . Like all of God's perfections, so also that

of God's glory is reflected in his creatures. It is communicable. . . For the beauty of God, scripture has a special word: glory."

—Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (trans. published by Baker Publishing Group, 2004), vol. 2, 252-254.

"God's beauty is the actual living exchange between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as this exchange is perfect simply as exchange, as it *sings*... Correspondingly, our enjoyment of God is that we are taken into the triune singing. Perhaps we may say that we are allowed to double the parts. And here too we must insist on concreteness. That the proclamation and prayer for the church regularly burst into beauty, indeed seems to insist on music and choreography and setting, is not an adventitious hankering to decorate. A congregation singing a hymn of praise to the Father is doubling the Son's praise, and the surge of rhythm and melody is the surge of the Spirit's glorification of the Father and the Son. . . The phrase 'one God' directs us finally to the sheer perichoresis of Father, Son, and Spirit, and that is to their communal music. We close the doctrine of God with this evocation of God's being, beyond which there is no more to say: God is a great fugue. There is nothing so capacious as a fugue."

—Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 1997), 235-236.

C. Manifest in both creation (Psalm 8, 19:1; Isaiah 6:3) and in redemption

John Calvin—creation as the “theater of God's glory”

Thus in worship we will rightly resist any way of talking about this that pits the glory of Christ as being overagainst that of creation. The glory of Christ may be even more luminous than the Canadian Rockies, but it is not opposed to it and only heightens our gratitude for it.

And we will come to realize that divine glory is partly studied by pastors and theologians, partly by nurses, biologists, and chemists.

D. Turning Glory Upside Down or Inside Out

See, especially, Thomas W. Martin, “What Makes Glory Glorious? Reading Luke's Account of the Transfiguration Over Against Triumphalism,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29.1 (2006): 2006; and Joel Marcus, “Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125, no. 1 (2006): 73-87.

Martin: “when glory is used in connection with ‘humility’, it signifies an inversion of the normal semantic field associated with glorious splendor. It is, in this usage, the countersign of all normal expectations for kings, princes, presidents, nations, multi-national corporations, pop-stars, and splendidly robed bishops, well-dressed pastors, or famous church buildings. . .” (5, n7).

Martin: “glory is, in the end (now and apocalyptically) nothing that we have been led to believe it is. It eschews triumphalisms and, instead, embraces humility, not as a tool to achieve triumph, but as glory's very essence.” (24).

We must filter out of our working concept of glory anything that looks like “vain-glory,” triumphalism. This has huge consequences, I think, for how we depict the Ascension and how we use the language of divine sovereignty, kingship, rule, etc. I would want to argue (strongly) for retaining that language, but also (strongly) for purging it of all kinds of non-scriptural content that we pour into it.

E. Beyond the (tired) old immanence/transcendence split

- OT narratives that link glory with God's revelation
- cf Richard Muller's description of both scholastic Reformed theology and the work of medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides. . . Glory as « a resplendence standing between the human mind and eye and the ultimate divine majesty that no one can withstand »
- We are led to muse « glory is a way of talking about how God's utter transcendence becomes utterly immanent » . . .
- Better: could renewed attention to divine glory as some of the best language for immanence be a way of finally recovering a sense of transcendence without sacrificing at all the language of intimacy, immanence, etc.

F. a biblical and provocative way for us reframe our language and understanding of the Holy Spirit

2Cor. 3:8: how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?

2Cor. 3:18: And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

1Pe 4:14: If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

See Eugene Rogers, Jr. *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West* (Eerdmans, 2005), esp. chapter 4.

SAMPLING OF SOURCES

Robert Wilkin, *Spirit of the Early Church*,

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1

---. *Commentary on the Psalms*. [several hundred texts]

Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 540-551.

Jonathan Edwards, "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World"

B. B. Warfield, *The Lord of Glory* (1907)

Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 252-255.

And also:--with attention to voices across both the Reformed, evangelical, and ecumenical spectrum. . .

John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*

Serene Jones, "Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics* (Westminster John Knox Press)

C. S. Lewis, the famous "Weight of Glory" sermon (re human beings reflecting glory)

George Stroup, *Before God* (Eerdmans), 162-168

David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*. (Eerdmans, 2004)

Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos, *Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith and Practice* (Eerdmans)

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah* (Continuum, 2006).

---. *Sabbath*.

N.T. Wright, "The Glory of God: John" in *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Eerdmans)

Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of God* (7 vols.)

Dick Keyes, *Seeing Through Cynicism: A Reconsideration of the Power of Suspicion* (IVP, 2006), in case all of this seems a bit too optimistic.

V. Questions to Probe in Christian Community

Basic

1. How can we invite our congregations, and ourselves, to attend to God's glory in worship—and not just to the “theme of glory” or a discussion of glory, but to the glory itself?
2. How can we speak of God's glory in a more comprehensively biblical way?
3. How can our art, sermons, music, and language more adequately convey God's glory? What palette of colors and sounds, what textures, what metaphors and images best promise to help us evoke and attend to God's glory? Especially if we really attend to these significant biblical/theological refinements of the concept?

What liturgical moments, particular artworks, particular musical pieces best disclose luminous divine glory? (Name examples). Suppose you were working with a liturgy built around a scripture text with divine glory at the center (Is. 60, John 1). If you could describe any musical work you would love to have, but don't, what would you choose? (You don't have to compose it, only describe it, in the confident hope that a composer will come along to deliver exactly what you describe ☺). Could it be that one of our most significant opportunities for musical growth is working to make our doxological language—esp. Gloria in Excelsis, Sanctus, prayer doxologies, etc.—more luminous, contemplative, substantial?

In what way does a Gothic cathedral convey glory? In what way does a new urbanist neighborhood (cf Eric Jacobsen). In what way do the churches designed by Edward Sovik (cf Mark Torgerson's new book). In what way do West Papuan thatched-roof church buildings, which are called “Glory Huts” (cf www.calvin.edu/worship/global)?

4. What would renewed attention to God's glory mean for worship in your congregation? Would it become more contemplative? exuberant? weighty? vibrant?
5. Might the language of divine glory be one of the best ways to retrieve a sense of transcendence in contemporary North American culture?

Evaluate this thesis: *“The future of the ‘emerging church’ may depend on whether its renewed attention to mystery and symbol can be attached to all that scripture teaches about the glory of God.”*

More Complex

6. How might the motif of “divine glory” function in the work of evangelism?, pastoral care? social justice? In one way, it's hard to imagine in a culture so averse to anything weighty, luminous, Godly. Yet is that too narrow a view?

Without the gospel, we are parched for a glimpse of glory (to mix metaphors). Conversion (and the invitation to conversion) might be approached from this point of view. See narrative of Jonathan Edwards conversion in George Marsden's biography of Edwards (Yale U. Press), p. 41-42.

See Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray Without Ceasing: Revitalizing Pastoral Care* (Eerdmans, 2006), for reflections on the significance of prayers of blessing, gratitude, and praise in pastoral care (chapter 9).

7. QUESTIONS OF TASTE AND JUDGMENT.

JW (in conversation with Frank Burch Brown on matters of taste): “Even if beauty is mostly “in the eye of the beholder,” it could be that a much larger problem is that we’re not really looking for beauty, or all that much concerned about the beauty of God. Some of us are looking for divine beauty, others for self-gratification, others for some upwardly mobile symbol of aesthetic elitism, while others are simply clinging to anything that appears to offer hope. That is, conceptually part of the problem may indeed be our Babel-like cultural disjunction (divided as we are by class, gender, race, and culture); but a larger—and solveable— part of the problem may be that we are simply looking for very different things.

A common goal of focusing attention on divine glory (the Bible’s name for the beauty of divine life) is one promising road for actually making progress in our aesthetic dilemma. One of our most important goals is that of generating common study and meditation on the theme of divine glory and promoting anything to imagine art and music that better evokes this theme. It could be the first order of business for any liturgical music commissioning project. “

8. What do you make of the photograph on the Symposium worship program cover?

9. CORRESPONDING EMOTIONS.

What emotions/affections are the fitting response to glory? An acclamation or shout seems fitting, as in Psalm 29 (“all in the temple cry ‘glory.’”) “Awe” is fitting, as is “quiet wonder.” Awe described as the “gateway” religious affection in Kendra Hotz and Matthew Mathews in *Shaping the Christian Life: Worship and the Religious Affections* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006).

But I wonder: are too many of our songs about glory more about our emotional self-fulfillment? What would it look like to think about creating worship songs, artworks, etc. that link holy “self-forgetfulness” with divine glory?

- Is there a deep wisdom in the practices of, say, Eastern Orthodox chant that sets glory texts to melodies and harmonies that avoid associations with personality and emotional fulfillment, but still are engaging, robust, etc.
- Should we go about imagining songs or artwork that purposely self-correct? That keep us back from certain kinds of very self-satisfying emotions? How can we compose songs in which emotional satisfaction is the by-product, but not the goal of the music?

What does a “wonder-wrapped soul” look like (cf Kuyper below)? Every culture, of course, has a different way of depicting that?

For more on worship and self-fulfillment, see Michael Lindvall, *The Christian Life: The Geography of God* (Westminster John Knox Press)

He [or she] who prays for something things, first of all, of his own need and want and embarrassment, and loses himself in the Being of his God no further than that with Him there is power and might by which God can come to the help of his suppliant’s need.

On the other hand, he [or she] who worships loses himself in God, forgets himself, in order to think of God alone, to let the lustrous beams of God’s virtues shine upon him, and to cause to radiate forth from his own soul the reflex of the greatness of God as it mirrors itself in his deeply moved and wonder-wrapped soul.”

--Abraham Kuyper, *Near Unto God*, 101

VI. Practices of “Holy Astonishment”

Witsius: attention to the glory of God “ought to raise our minds to holy astonishment” (cf Muller)

1. **LORD’S SUPPER.** Can the practice of singing the Sanctus at the Lord’s Supper be made more luminous, weighty, dramatic?
2. **BAPTISM.** How can we stress that dying/rising with Christ means that we are called to reflect the communicable attributes: “You are claimed by Jesus as his own; you are called to nothing less than reflecting the glory of God.”
3. **PRAYER.** In praise, how can we speak of divine glory more fittingly? How can we link glory with more of God’s actions in history as we narrate our praise (see *Worship Sourcebook*, section 4)? In petition, can we pray that we will reflect divine glory [it is, after all, a communicable attribute?
4. **THE NARTHEX EXCHANGE/THE CAR RIDE HOME.** Cultivating a new language for responding to worship. From “in worship today, I especially liked. . . .” to “in worship today, I was especially grateful to perceive God’s glory in. . . .”
5. **CONFESSION/ASSURANCE.** Could revitalize practice of penitence be one of the surest roads back to the recovery of this motif?
6. **MUSIC.** Keep a list of “Glory songs,” “Glory images,” Test to see how diverse a range of affect they can be. Evaluate them in terms of how they match the elements we have been discussing.
7. **PRAYER OUTSIDE LITURGY.** For devotions at your choir, worship committee meetings, worship team rehearsal, focus on texts in the Bible that refer to God’s glory for a series of weeks. Note how varied those contexts are.
8. **DISCUSSION.** Discuss how your worship leadership can be more “iconic.”
9. **TEACHING.** Teach (perhaps through a newsletter article?) how people in your congregation might talk differently about worship in ways that draw connections to God’s beauty and character? Preach about divine glory.
10. **PREACHING.** What would doxological preaching look like in your context? (See Geoffrey Wainwright on doxological preaching).
11. **LAW.** What if we re-attached a sense that Torah was an “embodiment” of divine glory, reconnecting law, wisdom literature, and the kind of piety reflected in Psalm 119
12. **UNITY/DIVERSITY.** (Isaiah 60, John 17, Rev. 21). As Richard Mouw explains in his memorable exposition of Isaiah 60: “When the end of history arrives, there is something to be gathered in. Diverse cultural riches will be brought into the Heavenly City. That which has been parceled out in human history must now be collected for the glory of the Creator.” It is this glorious vision that motivates our ministry today. As Mouw concludes, “The Christian community [now] ought to function as a model of, a pointer to, what life will be like in the Eternal City of God. The church

must be, here and now, a place into which the peoples of the earth are being gathered for new life.”
(Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 93).

13. DE-CELEBRITIZING WORSHIP. How can we make our worship services less dependent on individual personalities (preacher, musician, artist), but still in ways that create space for individual contributions, creativity, imagination, etc.? How can we lead worship in such a way that all kinds of wonderful, profound, excellent, creative things happen, but not in a way that calls attention to ourselves? How can the motif of divine glory ground genuine piety? (See John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*)

14. NIGHT PRAYER (COMPLINE), BOTH PRIVATELY AND CORPORATELY. Ultimately, the ancient practice of night prayer is, I think, a way of learning to go to sleep deeply aware of divine glory. See Cal Stapert’s book on the early church (esp. the chapter on hymnody).

**Still, beyond specific practices, this is about a certain perspective or outlook that shapes us 24-7. . .

Coming on the CICW Website

- *links to audio sermons on glory,
- *a word-study on this theme by Nathan Bierma,
- *a dramatic reading by Doug Porter,
- *copies of this handout and as much Symposium-related material as possible
- *more!

Postscript

All our controversies concerning doctrine relate either to the legitimate worship of God, or to the ground of salvation. As to the former, certainly we exhort men to worship God in neither a frigid nor a careless manner; and while we point out the way, we neither lose sight of the end, nor omit anything which is relevant to the matter. **We proclaim the glory of God in terms far loftier than it was wont to be proclaimed before; and we earnestly labor to make the perfections in which his glory shines better and better known.** His benefits towards ourselves we extol as eloquently as we can. Thus men are incited to reverence his majesty, render due homage to his greatness, feel due gratitude for his mercies, and unite in showing forth his praise. In this way there is infused into their hearts that solid confidence which afterwards gives birth to prayer. In this way too each one is trained to **genuine self-denial**, so that his will being brought into obedience to God, he bids farewell to his own desires. In short, as God requires us to worship him in a spiritual manner, so we with all zeal urge men to all the spiritual sacrifices which he commends.

--John Calvin.: “The Necessity of Reforming the Church” (1539) original: (C.R. VI, xxvii f.); *Calvin: Theological Treatises*. Ed. J.K.S. Reid, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977. 187.

Soli deo Gloria.