

REFORMED
WORSHIP

JONTY RHODES


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BLESSINGS OF THE FAITH

A Series

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Covenantal Baptism, by Jason Helopoulos

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Persistent Prayer, by Guy M. Richard

Reformed Theology, by Jonathan Master

Reformed Worship, by Jonty Rhodes

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For little Iona

May you join your family around the throne in worship

And with grateful thanks to Matthew, David, Paul, and
Jonny, from whom I've learned so much and to whom
I can always turn

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FOREWORD

It has often been said—sometimes with a sense of humor and sometimes in annoyance—that Presbyterian and Reformed churches love to do things “decently and in order.” I can understand both the humor and the frustration that lie behind that sentiment. We love our plans, our minutes, our courts, and our committees. Presbyterian and Reformed folks have been known to appoint committees just to oversee other committees (reminding me of the old *Onion* headline that announced “New Starbucks Opens in Rest Room of Existing Starbucks”). We like doing things so decently that we expect our church officers to know three things: the Bible, our confessions, and a book with *Order* in its title.

But before we shake our heads in disbelief at those uber-Reformed types (physician, heal thyself!), we should recall that before “decently and in order” was a Presbyterian predilection, it was a biblical command (see 1 Cor. 14:40). Paul’s injunction for the church to be marked by propriety and decorum, to be well-ordered

like troops drawn up in ranks, is a fitting conclusion to a portion of Scripture that deals with confusion regarding gender, confusion at the Lord's Table, confusion about spiritual gifts, confusion in the body of Christ, and confusion in public worship. "Decently and in order" sounds pretty good compared to the mess that prevailed in Corinth.

A typical knock on Presbyterian and Reformed Christians is that though supreme in head, they are deficient in heart. We are the emotionless stoics, the changeless wonders, God's frozen chosen. But such veiled insults would not have impressed the apostle Paul, for he knew that the opposite of order in the church is not free-flowing spontaneity; it is self-exalting chaos. God never favors confusion over peace (see 1 Cor. 14:33). He never pits theology against doxology or head against heart. David Garland put it memorably: "The Spirit of ardor is also the Spirit of order."¹

When Jason Helopoulos approached me about writing a foreword for this series, I was happy to oblige—not only because Jason is one of my best friends (and we both root for the hapless Chicago Bears) but because these careful, balanced, and well-reasoned volumes will occupy an important place on the book stalls of Presbyterian and Reformed churches. We need short, accessible books written by thoughtful, seasoned pastors for regular members on the foundational elements of church life and ministry. That's what we need, and that's what this series delivers:

wise answers to many of the church's most practical and pressing questions.

This series of books on Presbyterian and Reformed theology, worship, and polity is not a multivolume exploration of 1 Corinthians 14:40, but I am glad it is unapologetically written with Paul's command in mind. The reality is that every church will worship in some way, pray in some way, be led in some way, be structured in some way, and do baptism and the Lord's Supper in some way. Every church is living out some form of theology—even if that theology is based on pragmatism instead of biblical principles. Why wouldn't we want the life we share in the church to be shaped by the best exegetical, theological, and historical reflections? Why wouldn't we want to be thoughtful instead of thoughtless? Why wouldn't we want all things in the life we live together to be done decently and in good order? That's not the Presbyterian and Reformed way. That's God's way, and Presbyterian and Reformed Christians would do well not to forget it.

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Introduction

WELCOME IN

Invited up front by the friendly, well-meaning pastor, I looked out over a church perhaps ten times the size of my own. The elders joined us on the platform, and I was ushered front and center. At a nod from the music director, the congregation, pastor, and elders began to sing. No hymnbooks. No service sheets. No words projected on a screen. Everyone knew what to do. Well, nearly everyone. To this day I have no idea what they were singing. I *think* it was in Latin. I stood on the platform, moved my lips, guppy-fish style, and pretended I knew what was going on.

Perhaps you've had a similar experience. Worship styles, indeed worship services, vary hugely from church to church, even among Bible-trusting, evangelical Christians. They can at times leave us baffled. There are organs and electric guitars, choirs and praise bands, pastors in hipster jeans, pastors in suits, and pastors in robes straight out of the seventeenth century. There are formal services with heavily structured liturgies and video-montage peppered

“events” with donut breaks and puppet shows. What are we to make of all this? Is it the inevitable and welcome outcome of cultural diversity? A case of Pick ’n’ Mix Christianity, where everyone chooses their favorite flavor, no rights, no wrongs? Or might there be something more substantial at stake?

I hope this short book will persuade you of the latter—that worship matters. Not just *that* we worship; almost every Christian would agree on that. But that *how* we worship matters.

Straightaway I realize that might make some readers nervous. Haven’t we had enough of the “worship wars,” the interminable bickering between Christians who profess to love one another? Do we really need another pastor to wade into the action to strike left, right, and center at anyone who does things slightly differently from him? If you’re among those nervous readers, then let me reassure you: the pages that follow won’t be a demolition job of other tribes and traditions. Instead I’d like to show you around the house I live in: the house of Reformed worship. We’ll discover why it’s built the way it is and the reason for what may initially seem to be strange features.

But before we head inside, let’s spend a moment longer in the yard. Why is it even worth going in? Do the content and style of a worship service really matter that much? Let me suggest that they do.

The Father's Quest

Just once in the Bible we're told the Father is looking for something. "The Son of Man [comes] to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Christians are told to "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33). But the Father seeks only one thing: "True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him" (John 4:23). The Father is after worshippers. The Son of God—who was sent by his Father—knows this. To put it another way, Jesus was sent to rescue us so that we might worship.

Let that sink in. The Son of God took on flesh, became man, and dwelled among us so that we might worship. The Son of God walked in perfect obedience to his Father, fulfilling all righteousness and resisting the assaults of Satan, in order that we might worship. The Son of God was mocked, whipped, and spat at in order that we might worship. Saliva ran down the Creator's face in order that he might create worshippers. The Son of God was stripped and nailed to a cross. He suffered an agonizing death under the wrath of God in order that we might worship. The Son of God was torn apart, soul from body, buried in the ground before rising again, so that we might worship.

Does worship matter? Jesus clearly thinks so. The goal of the gospel is worship.

Reformation Recovery

Many of us are familiar with the Reformation, the great sixteenth-century movement to recover the grace of the gospel from the mire of medieval Roman Catholicism. What sometimes surprises people is how central the rediscovery of biblical worship was in the thinking of key Reformation leaders. For example, John Calvin wrote to Emperor Charles V that “the mode in which God is duly worshipped” takes the “*principal* place” in “the whole substance of Christianity,” with “the source from which salvation is to be obtained” coming *second*.¹ How does the Christian faith get established and keep its place in society? Simple, says Calvin: You need to know two things—how to worship God and how to be saved. I’m pretty confident most of us would have skipped the worship point. We tend to think it’s the gospel that matters; once you’re saved, you can worship how you like. But Calvin understood that worship makes and shapes disciples.

The fact that worship shapes us is a key biblical principle. Take Psalm 115. Describing idols, the writer says,

They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
and they do not make a sound in their throat.
Those who make them become like them;
so do all who trust in them. (vv. 7–8)

Idol worshippers become like their idols, because worship is formative and molds us into the image of whatever we revere. Thus the questions of who and how we worship are vital for the life and health of the church. In the pages that follow, we will see the great blessings of worshipping God in the manner he has laid out for us.

1

THE PROMISE OF WORSHIP

So, how should we worship? What are we meant to do? Once we see the importance of worship, these are natural questions for us to ask. But we need to slow down, at least a little. We've already seen that it is the Father who seeks worshippers, not the other way around. Worship begins not with our action but with God's. Before we can think about the right things to do in a worship service, we need to look at how God makes worship possible in the first place. Think of a game of tennis: you can't teach a player to return a serve unless someone else has served them a ball to begin with.

Worship, as we'll see, is like a conversation, a dialogue. But we're the second ones to speak, not the first. We won't know how to answer God in a way that pleases him until we see how he introduces himself and what he asks of us.

What's in a Word?

Already we're headed toward a tentative definition of *worship*. Worship is about what happens when God draws

near to his people. As with many theological terms, there's no passage in Scripture where Jesus gives us a dictionary definition. Sometimes people start with the English word. *Worship* is derived from "worth-ship," giving the sense that to worship God is to declare his worth, his value, his excellence. This is no bad place to begin, as far as it goes. When we gather, that is part of what we do. But the Bible wasn't written in English!

Others turn to the various Hebrew and Greek words that tend to be translated as "worship" in English versions of the Bible. Here things get a bit trickier. For a start, several different words in both languages tend to end up as *worship* in our translations. To add even more confusion, those words are not *always* translated this way.

Take the Hebrew word *avad*. It appears in 2 Samuel 15:8, where Absalom promises, "If the LORD will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will offer worship to the LORD." Clearly Absalom is talking about going to the temple and worshipping in the direct sense of offering thanksgiving sacrifices. But the ESV translates *avad* as "work" when Adam is told to "work" and "keep" the ground (Gen. 2:15) and as "serve" when Moses and Pharaoh argue over who the people of Israel ought to serve (see Ex. 9:1; 14:5 among many others). These verses use the same Hebrew word to refer to general "all-of-life" worship rather than the temple-focused "worship service."

So to fix on one or two Greek or Hebrew words, examine their etymology as we did with "worth-ship," and come

up with a definition of *worship* proves difficult. Some of these words have the sense of “to bow down”; others “to kiss”; others “to adore”; still others, as we’ve seen, “to work” or “to serve.” Word studies have their place and can help to ensure we don’t become too narrow in our understanding. But they’re not enough to get us to where we want to be in terms of realizing what goes on when we gather each Sunday morning. So before trying to define *worship* any further, we need to return to the idea that worship is initiated by God.

Saved to Worship

Where to begin the story of worship? We might start at creation, looking up at the stars above. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). With Nehemiah we might look to the angels and say to God, “The host of heaven worships you” (Neh. 9:6). In fact we could look almost anywhere, as the great hymnbook of the Bible ends with the call, “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!” (Ps. 150:6).

To cut to the chase, let’s dive in to the story of the Exodus. God’s people are enslaved to Pharaoh, but they are *God’s* people. Not Pharaoh’s. And so they need to be freed to worship him. Thankfully, God has made a commitment to them—a *covenant*, as the Bible calls it. *Covenant* is the Bible’s word for God’s relationship with his people. As the Israelites suffered under the Egyptian whip, “their cry for

rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Ex. 2:23–24).

“God remembered” doesn’t mean God was recalling something he’d forgotten. Rather, he was deciding to act on the basis of the covenant he had made. His remembering set off a battle between Pharaoh and God over whom Israel would serve. The battle most often is set out in terms of one of our worship words, *avad*. Sometimes the sense is what we might call “*all-of-life*” worship or, more simply, *service*. Hence the people of Israel “work [*avad*] as slaves” in Exodus 1:13, and later, after Israel is finally free, Pharaoh and his advisers have a change of heart, asking, “What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving [*avad*] us?” (Ex. 14:5).

But the same word can be used for the more narrow sense of worship, the focused time of meeting with the Lord. Hence Yahweh promises Moses at the burning bush that “when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve [*avad*] God on this mountain” (Ex. 3:12). Here he isn’t talking about an all-of-life posture but a focused time of worship. *Avad* is used plenty of other times in the Old Testament in this “narrow” sense of worship (see, for example, 2 Sam. 15:8; Ps. 102:22; Isa. 19:21).

At this point it’s worth noticing that the idea of “all-of-life” worship doesn’t come into being in the New Testament. Sometimes people have an understanding of worship that runs something like this: “In the Old Testament, Israel had

to gather together to worship at the temple. But in the New Testament Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that people will no longer worship at the temple, but will worship in spirit and truth. This means that ‘gathered worship’ is replaced with ‘all-of-life’ worship. That’s why Paul says we should offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, and this is our ‘spiritual worship’ (Rom. 12:1). Our gatherings nowadays are not about worship, because all of life is worship.”

This line of reasoning would be as confusing to an Old Testament Israelite as it should be to a New Testament Christian! “What do you mean, ‘All of life is now worship?’” the Israelite would say. “What do you think we’ve been doing for thousands of years?” Likewise, in John 4 Jesus isn’t saying the idea of gathered worship is over: rather, the location is shifting. What was once focused on Jerusalem is going to be made possible worldwide for all who gather in the power of the Holy Spirit and truth of the gospel. Indeed, the whole conversation is precisely about gathered worship!

God's People: Assemble!

To return to Exodus, it is true that the great rescue enabled Israel to serve-worship Yahweh with all their lives. But the whole story drives toward a special meeting with God at Sinai. There God gathers his people and meets with them through his Word. They see nothing, but his voice thunders, often mediated through the prophet Moses. The

Word gathers the people to worship. From the first meeting at Mount Sinai onward, that day is known as “the day of assembly” (Deut. 9:10; 10:4; 18:16). God assembles his people to worship him by listening to his Word and making various offerings. The details we’ll return to later. But a crucial principle is established: gathering to worship is a large part of the goal of God’s rescue.

That’s why when the Israelites leave Sinai, they don’t leave behind the idea of a day of assembling to worship. In the fourth commandment, God gives his people a day of Sabbath rest, of ceasing from their daily work in order to gather to worship: “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation” (Lev. 23:3). *Convocation* isn’t a word we use much nowadays, but it means a “calling together”—other translations, such as the New Living Translation, call it a “holy assembly.” Later, the book of Psalms rings with calls for this assembly or congregation to praise and worship the Lord:

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
(Ps. 111:1)

Praise the LORD!

Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the godly! (Ps. 149:1)

This understanding of the covenant-formed people of God meeting at his invitation, summoned by his Word, on the day of his choosing, in order to praise and worship him, is central to the whole Bible. It also gives us an insight into what worship is.

We could give all sorts of definitions that would be faithful to Scripture. From Psalm 29, we might say worship is gathering to proclaim God's greatness: "Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness" (Ps. 29:2). From Psalm 95, we might focus on the idea of worship as a bowing before God: "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!" (Ps. 95:6). Others have focused on definitions of worship that boil down to lists of things to do: worship is singing, praying, preaching the Bible, and so on.

For a big-picture view, we might simply say that worship is the right response of God's people when they gather to meet him. One helpful book on worship has the great title *Engaging with God*.¹ The worship words, as we've seen, have breadth to them. Sometimes the focus is on a particular activity, like bowing down or singing. But every worship encounter is about God's meeting his people. For the purposes of this book, our focus will be on how that should look for the church as we gather each Lord's Day.

How Can We Worship?

Ask any Israelite where worship happens and they'd give you a simple answer. It happens, of course, at God's house, the temple or, in earlier form, the tabernacle. Where can you worship God other than the place of his presence? After all, to worship God, he needs to be there!

The Garden Temple

The first temple in the Bible isn't built with human hands. No, the first meeting place between God and man is the garden in Eden. Here God "walks in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8). In fact, the garden is described in very temple-like language. Or, rather, the tabernacle and temple that come later are depicted as miniature Edens. The temple curtain, guarding the way to the inner sanctum where God's footstool—the ark of the covenant—rested, had cherubim sewn into it. Why? Because the garden of Eden was guarded by cherubim. The candlestick in the Holy Place is shaped like a tree, and the temple is decorated with pomegranates and fruit, again to remind the worshipper of the original meeting place between God and his people. The tabernacle had to be set up with the entrance on the east, just as the garden had its entrance on the east (see Gen. 3:24).²

What's the significance of this? For those of us who are less steeped in the world of the Old Testament, it might pass us by, but for an Israelite reading Genesis 1–3 the implication would be clear. God built the garden in Eden as the

first worship space and wanted to meet with his people. Our duty and our joy was meant to be found in worshipping and serving him. Already we're seeing a principle that will shape our own services: God decides where he will meet with his people. The invitation comes from him, and the location is therefore his to determine. We don't summon him where and when we see fit—the terms of engagement are his.

The Tabernacle Problem

Adam and Eve wanted more, though. Instead of worshipping and serving the Lord, they listened to Satan and were banished from paradise. Sin made them unfit for the presence of God, and thus the way back into his presence was guarded by the cherubim wielding a fiery sword. To try to approach God would mean death. Worship was now impossible.

And yet in his grace God didn't give up on his people. We've no space here to explore every stage on the journey, but throughout the book of Genesis we meet those who call on the name of the Lord, a people who are somehow able to worship. Sometimes they bring offerings like Abel; sometimes they build altars like Abraham. But events take a huge leap forward with the rescuing of Israel from Egypt and the building of the tabernacle.

The book of Exodus ends with God "moving in" to his new earthly home. Of course, in one sense he is always present everywhere. But it's at the center of the tabernacle that the glory cloud, the visible symbol of God's special

presence, settles. God is back dwelling with his people. Yet a problem remains. God has commanded Moses, “On the first day of the first month you shall erect the *tabernacle* of the *tent of meeting*” (Ex. 40:2).

The tent has two names. It is first a tabernacle, a “dwelling place” for God. But it’s also meant to be “tent of meeting.” Two different Hebrew words describe the same physical entity. By the end of Exodus, the tent is certainly a dwelling place. But God’s moving in means everyone else has to move out:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Ex. 40:34–35)

Even Moses can’t remain in the tent when God’s presence arrives. So, says Old Testament scholar Michael Morales, the tabernacle (dwelling place) isn’t yet a meeting place.³ No sinner can draw near. Worship is still an impossibility.

Through Fire and Sword

Thankfully the Bible doesn’t end with Exodus. The very next book, Leviticus, begins,

The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and

say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.” (Lev. 1:1–2)

God is active, calling Moses to come before him. And again, God is seeking worshippers to draw near. You could translate God’s words in verse 2 “If any man [*adam* in Hebrew] draws near . . .” God is making a way for man—Adam!—to return to his presence. And as the rest of the book of Leviticus makes clear, this requires sacrifices or offerings. In fact, the word translated *offering* in Leviticus comes from the Hebrew word meaning “draw near.” We might say the Israelites are to draw near with their “draw-nearings”! These offerings of various animals allow the worshipper to safely approach the Lord.

Although there’s considerable variety in the five main offerings Leviticus details, at the core is the idea that an animal must be killed and then burned on the altar before any further worship can take place. Notice that the animal, which stands in place of the worshipper, must pass through sword and fire—it must be killed by the blade, then burned on the altar. It’s as if the cherubim’s fiery sword falls on the lamb instead of Adam. Once that has taken place, and the worshipper is “clean” in God’s sight, then a whole host of other offerings and festivities can begin. And there were plenty of them! The Israelite calendar, be it the week, month, or year, was structured around the worship of God. But no offerings or festivities could take

place until sword and fire had consumed the sin-bearing substitute for the worshipper.

Leviticus and the whole tabernacle system reaffirm the lesson of Eden: it is God who decides where he meets his people. They also begin to make clear that it is God who decides *how* we may approach.

The Fire and Sword of Golgotha

At this stage you might be forgiven for wondering if you've been shortchanged. Wasn't this meant to be a book on worship, not a study guide to Leviticus? But what we're beginning to see, I hope, is that the story of the Bible is the story of worship. Created to meet in joyful awe of God, at the place and time of his choosing, right at the beginning we instead turned aside to worship other "gods." The just response of God was to expel us from paradise and leave us under threat of fire and sword if we dared draw near. And yet his grace continued to shine through: the Old Testament sacrificial system provided a way that his people could meet with him to worship, albeit in a limited way. The tabernacle shows it's no small thing for a person to wander into God's presence—but it was perhaps going to be possible again. The sacrifices are not an end in themselves: they are the prerequisite to drawing near to God in worship.

Yet as the book of Hebrews makes clear, what is required for our full restoration to the presence of God is not an animal substitute but a human one. The Son of

God came in the flesh, made like us in every way, in order that he might carry our sin to the cross and there bear the righteous anger of God in our place. Jesus went under the fire and sword in order that we might be spared. Death and judgment consumed him in order that they might never consume his people. He is the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Like the old covenant sacrifices that pictured his work, Jesus’s once-and-for-all sacrifice had a purpose. The death of Christ makes us able to enter God’s presence again, to draw near in humble confidence. This is a repeated theme of Hebrews:

Let us then with confidence *draw near* to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:16)

On the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we *draw near* to God. (Heb. 7:19)

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who *draw near* to God through him. (Heb. 7:25)

Let us *draw near* with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb. 10:22)

Remember that Leviticus began with God's instructing Moses on how he might draw near. Here at last in the atoning death of Jesus is the answer.

There's plenty we might say about what the cross achieves. But for our purposes we'll focus on one theme: the cross makes worship possible. Think of Jesus's cry as darkness enveloped him at Golgotha. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He was quoting the first line of Psalm 22. If you take a moment to read that psalm, you'll see it's an incredible prophecy of the crucifixion. The first twenty-one verses walk in painstaking detail through the agony of the cross, the descent of Christ to death. But the psalm doesn't end there. Verse 22 is a turning point, a transition from death to life:

I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
(vv. 22–23)

The One who went down to death has now returned! And why? To lead the congregation in worship. (Notice the assembly or congregation theme again!) We'll return to this idea at various points in the coming chapters, but for now just notice that the very psalm that Jesus uses to give us a glimpse into what's going on at Calvary is the

same psalm that prophesies that the Crucified One will rise again to lead his people in worship. Worship is the goal of atonement.

The Ultimate Worship Leader

All this means that worship is ultimately led by Jesus. He is the one who makes it safe for sinners like us to approach God. Jesus is the Christ or Messiah. These words—one Greek, one Hebrew—mean the same thing: *anointed*. In the Old Testament, three types of people were anointed by having oil poured on their heads as a sign of their commissioning as servants of God. These three were the prophets, priests, and kings. Jesus inherits each of their mantles. As *prophet*, he is the one through whom God speaks to us. As *king*, he rules over us and defends us. As *priest*, he atones for our sin and intercedes for us. All three roles have relevance for our worship. It is Jesus the prophet who speaks to us when his Word is faithfully preached. It is Jesus the king who determines what the people are and aren't to do as we gather together. And it is Jesus the priest who leads the congregation in worship.

All this means there is no way to meet God other than in and through Christ. He is not only our Great High Priest (see Heb. 4:14); he is the true temple where God and man meet (see John 2:21). So if you want to meet God, see his glory, and worship, the only place to come is to Jesus.

The People Who Worship

If Jesus is both the leader and place of worship, then we can already answer the question “Who can worship?” The answer is anyone who has put their trust in him. True worship is possible only for Christians. No one else can approach God in safety; no one else can be accepted. Jesus is the only truly beloved Son of heaven, he is the only high priest, he is the only atoning sacrifice. And he is therefore the only worship leader. Only those who bear his name worship with him. To return to Psalm 22 (picked up and applied to Jesus in Hebrews 2), Christ promises God that he will “tell of your name to *my brothers*” (Ps. 22:22). It is Christ’s family who gathers to worship; worship is for the church.

This has significance for how we think of our services. They are not *primarily* evangelistic events. We are not called to plan them *primarily* for those outside the church. Mission-minded pastors and Christians are sometimes tempted to try to remove everything from worship that might either offend or confuse a non-Christian. Often this is done with the best of motives as they try to create a place for non-Christians to hear the gospel. And of course it’s wonderful if unbelievers and seekers come along on Sunday mornings. Paul envisages just such a circumstance in 1 Corinthians 14:24–26.

But when friends come along to a worship service, they are being invited to see the church doing what she is called to do: worship the living God. They won’t be helped

if we hide away large chunks of who we are and what God has called us to do. Rather than trying to be novel and relevant, we find real freedom and power in trusting God to work in the ways he has given. Our friends will hear Jesus speak through his Word. They'll see his people pouring out their concerns and cares on a Good Shepherd who loves them. They'll listen as the comfort and assurance of the gospel is applied to wounded sheep. In short, they'll get to watch as God meets with his people during the most significant hour of the week. And we pray that, like the man in 1 Corinthians 14, they might "fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" (v. 25 NIV).

But all this comes about as the church gathers in Jesus's name and worships as he instructs us, not as we eradicate prayers, shorten sermons to five-minute TED Talks, pepper the service with film clips, and serve donuts and coffee halfway through. We can trust God's gifts to achieve God's purposes!

Conclusion

Worship is all about meeting with God through Christ. Rather than thinking of it as an activity we perform, either to keep God happy or to keep one another going, our first thoughts should go to God and to his grace and mercy. That he desires to meet with us is extraordinary! Already we can see that, whatever we say about what we do in worship, these activities are not ladders we climb to get closer

to God. Rather they are “means of grace”—things God uses to bless his people.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. How would you describe the link between the gospel and worship?
2. What is happening when the church gathers to worship?
3. What would you say to someone who says, “All of life is worship, so there’s nothing special about gathering together on a Sunday”?
4. What is the significance of Jesus being our worship leader?
5. Read again the “draw near” verses from Hebrews on page 31. What things can hinder us from wanting to draw near? How does the gospel encourage us to do so?