

Gospel-Shaped Worship: A Review of Recent Literature

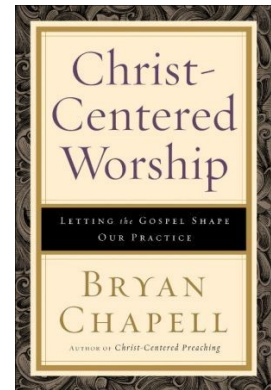
Scott Aniol¹

Books reviewed: *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*, by Bryan Chapell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); *Story-Shaped Worship: Following Patterns from the Bible and History*, by Robbie F. Castleman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013); *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church's Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel*, by Mike Cosper (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2013); *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, by James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

The gospel shape of Christian liturgy is receiving a decent amount of attention lately, including three volumes written in the past year. Each of these explores how the structure of Christian worship should follow (and, indeed, historically *has* followed) a similar outline that flows from a proper understanding of how we approach a holy God through the atonement of Christ by faith. These books follow in the tradition of other helpful treatments of the subject over the past several years, including *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* by Bryan Chapell. This short essay will review Chapell's work and the three most recent additions to the literature.²

Bryan Chapell's book is among the earliest of these recent treatments of gospel-shaped liturgy.³ Chapell, noted homiletician, theologian, and author of the popular volume *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Baker, 1994), is president of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, MO, the denominational seminary of the Presbyterian Church in America.

Chapell opens the book with a phrase that characterizes a presupposition true of each of the books under review: "Structures tell stories." The underlying assumption of Chapell's work is that the structure of our liturgy carries meaning, and therefore a Christian liturgy should communicate the message of the gospel. "Whether one intends it or



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² Another example of a recent volume that articulates a gospel-shaped liturgy is Constance M Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

³ This review of *Christ-Centered Worship* originally appeared in *Themelios* 34 (2009): 444–46.

not," Chapell argues, "our worship patterns always communicate something" (18). He seeks to sidestep the prevalent traditional/contemporary worship debate by urging church leaders to allow gospel purposes to shape their worship—not only the content, but also the structure.

Chapell begins in the first six chapters by comparing and contrasting the most influential Christian liturgies in the history of Christianity: pre-Trent Rome (chap. 2), Luther (chap. 3), Calvin (chap. 4), Westminster (chap. 5), and modern (specifically Robert Rayburn's; chap. 6). While demonstrating that these various liturgies certainly differ as they reflect the specifics of the theological systems in which they operate, Chapell's aim is to show that "where the truths of the gospel are maintained there remain commonalities of worship structure that transcend culture" (8). He shows that no matter the differences, each liturgy contains common elements: adoration, confession, assurance, thanksgiving, petition, instruction, charge, and blessing (98–99). Not only are the elements common, but their progression also remains consistent among the liturgies. Chapell argues that this is the case because each liturgy "reflects the pattern of the progress of the gospel in the heart" (99). A person recognizes the greatness of God (adoration), which leads him to see his need for confession of sin. He then receives assurance of pardon in the gospel through the merits of Christ, and he responds with thanksgiving and petition. God then gives his Word in response to the petition (instruction), leading to a charge to obey its teaching and promise of blessing. This common liturgical structure, telling the story of the gospel, "re-presents" the gospel each time God's people worship (99).

Chapell continues in chapter seven by demonstrating that such a liturgical structure is present not only in historical liturgies but also in scriptural examples. He surveys Isaiah's worship (Isa 6), Sinai worship (Deut 5), Solomon's worship (2 Chr 5–7), Temple worship (Lev 9), New Testament (NT) spiritual worship (Rom 11–15), and eschatological worship (Rev 4–21) to illustrate that in each case these same common liturgical elements appear in progression. Chapell is not arguing that with each case the liturgy was consciously meant to communicate the gospel or that such liturgies are prescriptive but that "there are regular and recognizable features to God's worship because there is continuity in his nature and the way he deals with his people" (105). Thus, even historical liturgies contain common elements, not because any one authority or tradition has controlled how all churches should worship, but because a "gospel-formed path always puts us in contact with God's glory, our sin, his provision, our response, and his peace. By walking a worship path in step with the redemptive rhythm we simultaneously discover the pattern of our liturgy and the grace of our Savior" (115).

This then leads Chapell to insist that "where the gospel is honored, it shapes worship. No church true to the gospel will fail to have echoes of these historic liturgies" (25). He summarizes the flow of his argument:

The liturgies of the church through the ages and the consistent message of Scripture combine to reveal a pattern for corporate worship that is both historical and helpful for our time. Christian worship is a "re-presentation" of the gospel. By our worship we extol, embrace, and share the story of the progress of the gospel in our lives. We begin with adoration so that all will recognize the greatness and goodness of God. In the light of his glory, we also recognize our sin and confess our need of his grace. As-

urance of his pardon produces thanksgiving. With sincere thanksgiving, we also become aware that all we have is from him and that we depend on his goodness for everything precious in our lives. Thus, we are compelled to seek him in prayer for our needs and his kingdom's advance. His loving intercession makes us desire to walk with him and further his purposes, so our hearts are open to his instruction and long to commune with him and those he loves. This progress of the gospel in our lives is the cause of our worship and the natural course of it. We conclude a service of such worship with a Charge and Benediction because the progress of the gospel is God's benediction on our lives. (116)

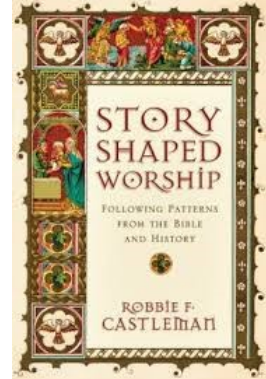
This doesn't necessarily mean that every element will be emphasized equally (111), nor does it imply that there is never room for changing the structure (147). In fact, Chapell provides helpful examples of how "as long as its gospel purpose is fulfilled, each aspect of a Christ-centered liturgy may be expressed through a variety of worship components" (147–49). Again, the medium is something that is shaped by the message, not a structure artificially imposed upon the message.

Chapters 9–12 are dedicated to exploring how this kind of gospel-informed thinking about worship can help church leaders move beyond simply personal preferences or tradition to make decisions about their worship that will best communicate the gospel, both to believers and unbelievers alike. Chapell addresses controversial issues such as musical style, reverence vs. relevance, and seeker-sensitivity, attempting to show how in each case, an allegiance to Christ-centered worship will help those involved come to a unified consensus (130–35).

In the second half of the book (chaps. 13–24), Chapell provides helpful resources for the implementation of Christ-centered worship, including specific examples of the various components (e.g., call to worship, affirmation of faith, confession of sin), example service orders across a broad spectrum of traditions, and discussion of some of the more controversial practical matters (e.g., frequency of communion, Scripture readings, preaching styles, and musical styles). In each discussion Chapell attempts to allow the gospel to relieve the tensions.

In *Christ-Centered Worship* Bryan Chapell presents an engaging exploration of how the gospel should shape Christian worship. Although one may disagree in some areas of specific application, pastors especially will certainly benefit from an approach to worship that is richly conservative (e.g., an appreciation for and desire to conserve what has come before), biblical, and Christ-centered. Chapell's work has had significant impact upon other recent writings, especially Cospers' *Rhythms of Grace*.

One of the books that presents a helpful balance between deep insight and accessibility is Robbie F. Castleman's *Story-Shaped Worship*. A professor of biblical studies and theology at John Brown University, Castleman seeks to counteract the individualism prevalent in worship today (189) by articulating a theology of worship that finds its "story" not in the individual and his preferences, but in the shape of the gospel itself "outlined in Scripture, enacted in Israel, refocused in the New Testament community of the early church, regulated and guarded by the apostolic fathers, [and] recovered in the Reformation" (14).



Toward this end, Castleman progressively builds a case for worship that is an ordered (chap. 1) reenactment of the gospel (chap. 2) in a sacred space (chap. 3) according to God's Word (chaps. 4–5, 7) that results in obedience to God's will (chap. 6). This particular worship pattern, she argues in Part Two, continued to be nurtured in the patristic church (chap. 8), by the Reformers (chap. 9), and still shapes worship in some traditions even today (chap. 10).

Castleman begins formulating this understanding by arguing that the ordered rhythm rooted in creation (48) provides "a significant bedrock aspect of liturgical development" (34) since, just as "what one does and how one does it really is indicative of who one is and what one truly believes," similarly "how people worship . . . does reflect what they truly believe about the God they worship" (30). Thus, just as God created the cosmos in an "orderly, sequential fashion" (32), even so one who truly believes in this God will worship him in an ordered way that reflects the character of the Creator.

The worship of Israel reveals the particular shape of such ordered worship as one of reenactment. Everything about Israel's worship, from the tabernacle construction to the sacrificial system (80–81), displays the essence of their worship as "remembering how the Lord God had delivered them and reenacting this deliverance" (43) through seven primary elements: call to worship, praise and adoration, confession, declaration of God's good news, the Word of the Lord, responding to God's Word, and the benediction (81–87). This kind of reenactment continues in the New Testament (58) and provides a means to "reflect the biblical story that is central to a congregation's identity as God's people," to "serve as a corrective to worship which is designed mainly for the contemporary concerns of a congregation," and to "celebrate the character of God and his redemptive work in the world" (58–59).

This requires establishing a "set apart" space and time for such reenactment (73) that "helps worshipers worship and does not distract their attention from the worship of God" (66). Castleman rejects the popular repudiation of a sacred/secular distinction in favor of "all-of-life worship," insisting that "when 'worship' means anything that anyone does, it tends to mean very little in terms of what pleases God" (74). Rather, she argues that a sacred space allows the worship to "reflect, even if imperfectly, God's holiness and character" (64).

Nevertheless, corporate worship that follows the biblical pattern also affects life outside the sacred space, for "this liturgy is a godly rhythm for the whole of life" (91). Since the pattern acts out the gospel, and since the gospel motivates godly living (Tit 2:12–14), regular reenactment of this "story" on a weekly basis will shape the worshiper by the gospel. And since this is the pattern set forth in Scripture, ordering worship according to this structure "helps God's people steer clear of the ambiguity of using worship as a tool to fulfill their own desires" (97).

The book presents a case for gospel-shaped liturgy similar to the other recent volumes under review, but in a clear and accessible manner that does not sacrifice depth. Castleman builds her argument progressively in a way that is convincing and very easy to follow. Her clarion call to evangelical churches to abandon worship shaped by the market in favor of worship ordered by Scripture is refreshing and much needed.

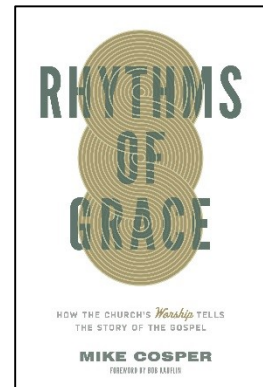
The most glaring weakness of the book is the absence of Communion in Castleman's sevenfold worship pattern. Communion with God is the essence of worship, beginning at the Garden, pictured in the Hebrew feasts, and culminating in the Lord's Table. Indeed, it should be the climax of any gospel-shaped liturgy, for in eating at the Table of the Lord, we picture his acceptance of us through Christ by faith. The other puzzling item with how Castleman presents her case is her rejection on the one hand of the regulative principle of worship in favor of what she calls the "canonical theological approach to worship" (19), compared with her insistence on the other hand that worship must be "by the book" for "maintaining a right relationship with God and for offering worship that honors God's character" (97). Perhaps she believes that she needs to reject the regulative principle in order to follow the gospel-shaped liturgy she proposes, not realizing that while the regulative principle protects the God-approved *elements* of worship, it nevertheless allows for flexibility in the *order* of worship.

Story-Shaped Worship strikes a healthy balance between the depth of argument in James K. A. Smith's *Imagining the Kingdom*, which would be difficult to follow for an average layperson, and the popular accessibility of Mike Cospers's *Rhythms of Grace*, which makes a good argument but doesn't explore the issue as fully. In many ways it resembles Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Worship*, but Castleman presents a more robust biblical argument than Chapell, who spends more time examining the historic liturgies. Thus, I highly recommend Castleman's book for pastors and church musicians as a thorough but readable introduction to gospel-shaped liturgy.

Cospers's *Rhythms of Grace* targets a more popular audience than Castleman or Smith and evidences clear influence by Chapell and Smith's previous work, *Desiring the Kingdom*. Cospers, pastor of worship and arts at Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky, roots his discussion of Christian liturgy in the Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation motif that he suggests summarizes the gospel and governs the storyline of Scripture. This biblical theme should inform Christian liturgy, Cospers argues, "because the gospel is all about worship" (26).

Cospers explores this motif in the first four chapters of the book, contrasting in Chapter 5 what he believes to be a biblical model of worship with what worship looks like in most evangelical churches today, and he explains in Chapter 7 what he considers contributed to problems in contemporary worship. Chapter 6 reveals the influence of Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom* in his argument that the goal of gathering in worship is to provide habits that will aid in spiritual formation. Likewise, Cospers's summary of the shape of historical liturgy in Chapter 8 cites Chapell's discussion. Chapters 9 and 10 break from the primary argument of the work thus far developed to address the matters of singing in worship and the worship leader's responsibilities as pastor.

Although Cospers clearly builds off other work in his popular presentation, his discussion of the Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation biblical structure does contribute a



metanarrative approach to the subject, and he offers an informative chart that moves beyond Chapell by illustrating how Chapell's more specific liturgical shape fits in the larger structure (123).

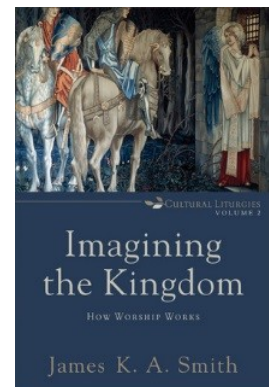
Cosper's description of what led to a neglect of a gospel-shaped liturgy is also very helpful, and because of the accessible nature of his writing, this portion in particular could provide a healthy corrective for churches today. He correctly identifies one of the primary roots of problems with evangelical worship with Revivalism, which he argues "transformed worship from the banquet hall to the concert hall" (111). He observes that most churches today use some form (intentionally or not) of the Wimber Temple/Tabernacle model of worship in which worship is essentially an experience of being "ushered into the presence of God." Cosper argues that this is biblically and theologically inferior to the historic gospel-shaped liturgy that he is advocating (113).

The most puzzling part of Cosper's work is the final two chapters. Rather than clearly fitting into the overarching argument of the book, it appears that Cosper simply appended these chapters because he felt the subjects needed to be discussed. The book would have been complete, and possibly even stronger, had he omitted these chapters. Chapter 10 is helpful on its own merits, but Cosper's discussion of singing actually seems to contradict arguments earlier in the book. On the one hand, Cosper argues that worship creates habits that shape the believer either positively or negatively: "How we gather shapes who we are and what we believe, both explicitly (through the actual content of songs, prayers, and sermons) and implicitly (through the cultural ethos and personas)" (94). Yet in Chapter 9, even though he does acknowledge some weaknesses of contemporary songs today, he nevertheless continues to insist that musical form itself is neutral. This clearly contradicts his earlier discussion of how worship (even the "cultural ethos") shapes us.

Nevertheless, *Rhythms of Grace* does provide an important and accessible explanation of why and how Christian liturgy should be shaped by the gospel. In some ways Cosper's book may be even an improvement over Chapell's since it explores more of the theological and biblical logic beneath a gospel-shaped liturgy rather than getting bogged down in discussions of historic practice.

James K. A. Smith's *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, the second volume in a series that began with *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009), is definitely the most philosophically dense of the books under review. A professor of philosophy at Calvin College, Smith seeks to explore in *Imagining the Kingdom* the nature of what worship does and argues that the repeated acts of Christian worship using appropriate forms that embody the biblical narrative shape us toward living out our mission.

Smith builds from his argument in *Desiring the Kingdom* that humans are motivated, not primarily by what they think, but by what they desire. This realm of the affections and imagination is thus critically important for the formation of Christian virtue since knowledge is acquired more through intuition than proposition. Smith argues that this kind of shaping takes place in community through various habitual acts that orient our understanding of life, which leads to his description of human beings as "liturgical animals" (3). Thus corporate worship is significant for Christians, for it is these biblical liturgical acts that "draw the people of God into union with Christ in order to thereby shape, form, equip, and prime actors—doers of the Word"



(6). Corporate worship does not target only the intellect, which Smith argues is a limited way of understanding Christian education (7); rather, worship shapes what we love, and “we *do* what we love” (12, emphasis original).

Smith builds on this foundation to argue that “the way to the heart is through the body, and the way into the body is through story” (14). He reasons that it is ultimately acting out *story* that shapes imagination (109) through metaphor (117) perceived through the senses. Liturgy is story, and “the truth of a story or poem is carried in its form, in the unique affect generated by its cadences and rhythm, in the interplay and resonances of the imaginative world it invokes, in the metaphorical inferences that I ‘get’ on a gut level” (134). In other words, for Smith the purpose of the shape of liturgy and of art within worship is not simply to express truth in an interesting way (160) but to embody an aesthetic reality that then shapes our conception of life in ways mere words cannot: “Form matters because it is the form of worship that tells the Story (or better, *enacts* the Story)” (168, emphasis original).

Imagination shaped by biblical story then leads us to actively live out that story, which Smith roots in the *missio Dei*, participating in the “cosmic redemption by which Christ is redeeming all things” (156). Thus corporate worship is the gathering in which we are sent out to participate in this mission in ways toward which we have been shaped in the act of worship itself. He summarizes his argument quite nicely:

The ultimate upshot of my argument is to suggest that educating for *Christian* action will require attending to the formation of our unconscious, to the priming and training of our emotions, which shape our perception of the world. And if such training happens through narratives, then education for Christian action will require an education that is framed by participation in the Christian story. Our shorthand term for such narrative practice is *worship*. (38, emphasis original)

Smith’s work presents an important corrective to common thinking in evangelicalism that minimizes the moral impact of liturgy and the arts as “contextual” matters that neutrally adorn central truth. Smith is quite correct when he insists that such perspective “misses the centrality and primacy of what we love” (7), or, I would add, *how* we love; there is a reason Scripture roots the Great Commandment in the realm of the affections (Matt 22:37). This emphasis on the affective provides the basis for Smith’s refreshing understanding of aesthetic form. Form matters for Smith; it is not amoral, for

the meaning of the work of art cannot be distinguished from its material form because such meaning is not just an ideal intellectual content that could be indiscriminately transposed from container to container. The material meaning of the work of art is bound up with its material form and is resonant with our own materiality, made sense of by our bodies. (60)

Thus that meaning shapes the imagination. For Smith, “the point isn’t that both form and content matter. The point is more radical than that: in some significant sense we need to eschew the form/content distinction” (169). The implication is that some kinds of art are incompatible with the aim of Christian worship, and thus some Christians “end up singing lyrics that confess Jesus is Lord accompanied by a tune that *means* something very different”

(175, emphasis original). Furthermore, Smith provides a thoughtful basis for a view of common liturgy that recognizes the acting out of the gospel in worship as essentially formative in living out the gospel the rest of the week. Finally, Smith's emphasis on a "handed down way of being shared among community" (81) is likewise a welcome corrective to contemporary repudiation of tradition and neglect of congregational participation in worship.

I find a few other of Smith's arguments problematic, however. First, rooting Christian action in the *missio Dei* fails to recognize fundamental differences between God's mission and what he has called the church to do specifically. This leads naturally to a second concern, and that is with Smith's basis for Christian action found in cultural transformation, citizens of the kingdom of God "who *act* in the world as agents of renewal and redemptive culture-making" (6, emphasis original). This framework risks a neglect of the Great Commission in favor of a "cultural mandate," which, contrary to Smith, are not equivalent (151). Smith would have been better rooting the end of worship in simply being "doers of the Word" (6) rather than the *missio Dei* and cultural transformation. Third, in discussing the body and emotion, Smith does not distinguish between visceral impulses and the spiritual affections. He seems to recognize a need for some sort of distinction (37, n13), but in reacting against "the rationalism born of the Enlightenment legacy," he resorts to a "romantic" understanding of anthropology (46) rather than a biblical/pre-modern conception. Finally, although I agree wholeheartedly with Smith that imagination/affection is what motivates us to action and that action must be informed by right knowledge and beliefs, Smith seems to go too far, minimizing the critical importance of doctrine and beliefs summarized in propositional statements (173). On the contrary, the Great Commandment is predicated on the *Shema*—"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4); right love requires right belief.

Smith's work is far-reaching in its implications, especially in its discussion of the importance of form for nurturing the imagination. His presentation is repetitive at times, which is sometimes helpful and other times distracting. Nevertheless, I would quickly recommend this work for pastors, church leaders, and students of worship for its important explanation of "how worship works."

Each of these books provides welcome corrective to worship today that often has little biblical or theological structure or that is actually rooted in unbiblical philosophy. If I had to choose just one to recommend, I would choose Castleman's book for its balance of scholarship and accessibility and its consistency in application of the underlying philosophy to issues such as musical form in worship. Nevertheless, each of these is well worth reading, and hopefully they will continue to influence and stimulate worship discourse in the days ahead.