

Editorial

Scripture-Shaped Worship

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What would it mean for our worship to be truly shaped by Scripture? Christians are people of the book. Conservative Evangelical Christians, in particular, demand that their beliefs and lives be governed by Scripture. God’s inspired Word is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). Therefore, for Christ-honoring sanctification to take place, the lives of Christians must be governed and saturated by the living and active Word of God. And for this same reason, corporate worship must also be governed and saturated by the Word; since public worship both *reveals* belief and *forms* belief, it must be shaped by Scripture.

This emphasis upon biblical authority over our corporate worship applies in at least four areas: First, the elements of our worship must be regulated by the Word of God. The sufficient Word has given those ordinary means of grace that, through their regular use, will shape believers to live as disciples who observe everything Jesus taught: reading the Word (1 Tim 4:13), preaching the Word (2 Tim 4:2), singing the Word (Col 3:16, Eph 5:19), prayer (1 Tim 2:1), giving (1 Cor 16:2), baptism (Matt 28:19), and the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:23-32). The regular, disciplined use of these means of grace progressively forms believers into the image of Jesus Christ; these Spirit-ordained elements are the means through which Christians “work out [their] own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [them], both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13).

Second, the content of our worship elements must be regulated by the Word of God. Paul said to preach *the Word*. He said that when we sing, we must “let *the Word* of Christ dwell richly within

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us.” Even our prayers to God should be saturated with Scripture. Put simply, in corporate worship we read the Word, sing the Word, preach the Word, pray the Word, and act out the Word. Our worship is born of, built on, fueled by, governed by, filled with, and sanctified by the truth of God’s Word.

Third, the forms of our worship should be regulated by the Word of God. We must remember that the Bible is not simply a static collection of theological propositions. Rather, Scripture is a collection of God-inspired literary forms that express his truth, and all of Scripture, including its aesthetic aspects, carry the weight of divine authority. Therefore, as we choose artistic forms of expression in our modern cultural context, we must be sure that the way in which those forms communicate truth corresponds to the way in which Scripture itself aesthetically communicates truth.

Fourth, the order of our worship should be regulated by the Word of God. If the primary purpose of corporate worship is the edification of believers—God forming us into mature disciple-worshippers, then even the structure of our services should follow what God has given to us in Scripture. God made clear this purpose when he instituted corporate worship assemblies in the OT, establishing a structural pattern that continues also into the NT. God often calls these assemblies of worship “memorials,” meaning more than just a passive remembrance of something, but actually a reenactment of God’s works in history for his people such that the worshipers are shaped over and over again by what God has done. Beginning at Mt. Sinai (Exod 19–24), God instituted a particular order of what the OT frequently calls the “solemn assemblies” of Israel. This order reflects what I like to call a “theo-logic,” in which through the order of what they do as they assemble, God’s people reenact God’s atoning work on their behalf. For sake of time, I will just summarize this structure:

God reveals himself and calls his people to worship.

God’s people acknowledge and confess their need for forgiveness.

God provides atonement.

God speaks his Word.

God's people respond with commitment.

God hosts a celebratory feast.

This same theo-logic characterized the progression of sacrifices within the tabernacle assemblies and the dedication of Solomon's temple (2 Chron 15–17). In each case, the structure of the worship assemblies follows a theo-logical order in which the worshipers reenact the covenant relationship they have with God through the atonement he provided, culminating with a feast that celebrates the fellowship they enjoy with God because of what he has done for them.

While the particular rituals present in Hebrew worship pass away for the NT church, the book of Hebrews tells us that these OT rituals were “a copy and shadow of heavenly things” (8:5). Thus while the shadows fade away, the theo-logic of corporate worship remains the same: we are reenacting God's atoning work on our behalf when we gather for corporate worship. Significantly, Hebrews teaches that when we gather for services of worship, through Christ we are actually joining with the real worship taking place in the heavenly Jerusalem of which those Old Testament rituals were a mere shadow. And so it is important to recognize that the two records we have in Scripture of heavenly worship also follow the same theo-logic modeled in the OT. When Isaiah was given a vision of heavenly worship in Isaiah 6, the order of what happens mirrors the same theo-logic as that given to Israel for its worship. Likewise, when John is given a similar vision of heavenly worship, the order of what happens is the same. From creation to consummation, the corporate worship of God's people is a memorial—a reenactment—of the “theo-logic” of true worship: God's call for his people to commune with him through the sacrifice of atonement that he has provided, listening to his Word, responding with praise and obedience, and culminating with a beautiful picture of perfect communion with God in the form of a feast. This reenactment in a corporate worship service of God's work for us is what will progressively edify us over time to live out our relationship with God through Christ as his mature disciple-worshippers.

This kind of Scripture-formed, life-transforming worship is what we strive to impart to our students at Southwestern Baptist

Theological Seminary, and each of the articles in this volume of our journal reflects this concern. Whether you are a pastor, a professor, or a student, we trust that these will help you as you strive to conform your church's worship to the living and powerful Word of God.