

RE-VISIONING THE CORPORATE GATHERING: THREE KEYS TO TRANSFORMATIONAL WORSHIP

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Between 1997 and 2002, the Barna Research Group conducted national surveys on corporate worship among Christian church attenders. One-third of respondents indicated they had never “experienced the presence of God.”¹ Even more concerning was “when asked to explain what worship was in their own words, two-thirds had no idea or provided a vague or meaningless explanation that had no apparent connection to worship.”² Furthermore, when asked what the most important outcome of the corporate gathering should be, nearly a quarter answered that they simply “didn’t know,” and they had no idea why it was important for them to participate in weekly corporate worship.³ While twenty years have elapsed since Barna’s worship survey, perhaps his research sheds light on a more recent study published by LifeWay Research, which reported that “less than half of Americans say they belong to a house of worship, marking the first time, since Gallup began collecting data in 1937, a majority aren’t part of a church, synagogue, or mosque. Religious membership was stable throughout the twentieth century but fell from 70% in 2000 to 47% in 2020.”⁴ While many factors have contributed to the sharp decline in American church attendance,

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¹George Barna, “How Pastors, Worship Leaders, and Christians View Worship,” in *A Distant Harmony: The Papers of the Hearn Symposium on Christian Music*, ed. Randall Bradley (Waco, TX: Baylor School of Music, 2002), 4.

²Barna, “How Pastors, Worship Leaders,” 4.

³Barna, “How Pastors, Worship Leaders,” 4-5.

⁴Aaron Earls, “22 Vital Stats for Ministry in 2022,” LifeWay Research, January 5, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/01/05/22-vital-stats-for-ministry-in-2022/>. Pew research indicates an even greater drop in church attendance. Only 33 percent of US adults attend church regularly. Justin Nortey and Michael Rotolo, “How the Pandemic Has Affected Attendance at US Religious Services,” Pew Research Center, March 28, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/>.

could Barna's survey data showing low expectation and misunderstanding of corporate worship be an unrecognized influence? If there is a connection between the lack of engagement among worshipers twenty years ago and significantly lower church attendance today, in what ways can Southern Baptist and other evangelical pastors and worship ministry leaders begin to effectively reverse declining church attendance trends? Pastors and worship ministry leaders have an opportunity to reframe their congregation's view of worship as they cast a vision that the God of the universe has invited his redeemed to see him, engage with him, respond to him, and become more like his Son.

One of the reasons for the lack of congregational engagement is related to a directly proportional lack of vision casting by church leaders for what Christian worship can be on Sunday mornings. In his influential work, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, Allen P. Ross articulates the following concerning the weekly corporate worship of God's people:

For worship to be as glorious as it should be, for it to lift people out of their mundane cares and fill them with adoration and praise, for it to be the life-changing and life-defining experience it was designed to be, it must be inspired by a vision so great and so glorious that what we call worship will be transformed from a routine gathering into a transcendent meeting with the living God.⁵

Ross identifies several vital arteries through which the vibrant worship life of congregational engagement flows. First, God's people should be captivated by a glorious vision of weekly corporate worship. Second, God's people need to be reminded that transformation is not only possible in biblically rooted corporate worship; it is *inevitable*. Third, Christian worship is the space between heaven and earth in which believers are called to a transcendent encounter with the triune God, who made worship possible in the first place.

I. CASTING A GLORIOUS VISION FOR THE WEEKLY GATHERING

As believers enter the space in which they interact with each other and the Holy One who called them to worship, how effectively have they

⁵Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 39.

been prompted by ministry leaders to consider what is about to take place during worship? In services that are music-driven, congregants may be encouraged to sing and clap to an energized, upbeat opening song, but what distinguishes that particular activity from a secular concert? In other words, do the ministry leaders who prepare and lead the order of worship consider the essentiality of a Spirit-infused, scripturally saturated call to worship in casting a vision for worship? What congregational prompts are designed to help the congregation awaken to the reality that the act of Christian worship stands in stark contrast to the world from which worshipers have come? In many churches, congregants endure the music as they wait for the only thing they seem to benefit from in the service—the sermon. When pastors sit in the pews reviewing their sermon notes while the congregation sings, no one in the room thinks what they are doing is important; in their eyes, the worship is merely a warm-up for the main element—the sermon.

Ministry leaders who miss the opportunity to cast a vision for what worship is in general (the macro view) and the specific vision for a particular worship service (the micro view) unintentionally contribute to what Barna's research revealed: that nearly a quarter of churchgoers "have no idea what to expect from their participation in the weekly corporate gathering."⁶

In more liturgically-structured Protestant traditions, "gathering" elements such as chimes, invocations, choral calls to worship, organ or instrumental preludes, or an opening element designated as "preparation for worship" are used.⁷ While gathering elements can be effective, without the worship leaders attending to the efficacy of the aforementioned elements, and with no consistent articulation as to the preparatory elements' purpose, worship prompts such as chimes can often devolve into meaningless background noise like music on an elevator.

In his book, *What Happens When We Worship*, Jonathan Cruse shares that "God wants from us nothing less than hearts, souls, and minds that are fully enraptured with the wonder of biblical worship from beginning

⁶Barna, "How Pastors, Worship Leaders," 5.

⁷In the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and Faith Alive Christian Resources *Worship Sourcebook*, editors provide examples of biblical passages and written prayers encouraging congregants to prepare for worship. An example from the *Worship Sourcebook* follows: "Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name through Christ, our Lord. Amen." *Worship Sourcebook*, 2nd ed., Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and Faith Alive Christian Resources (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 46-47.

to end—which is to say, He wants worshipers to be fully enraptured with Him.”⁸ What elements and practices are embedded in the worship culture of churches that encourage congregants’ active engagement, fostering what Cruse calls being “fully enraptured with God”? In a culture captivated by a screen-driven world people hold in their hands, many church attendees’ sensitivity and even patience to the genuine reality of God’s presence in worship has been dulled. Therefore, a Holy Spirit-infused, Scripture-saturated, thoughtful, intentional welcome that includes a vision for weekly worship should be a top priority for those leading the gathering.

1. *A Vision for Christ’s Work in Worship.* Some of the misguided answers to the “What is worship?” question posed by Barna were undoubtedly expressed by sincere, well-intentioned Christians who simply did not know what they did not know. “Worship is singing,” or “worship is going to church,” describe general activities of worship but fall far short of the essence of understanding biblical worship. Simple, but accurate, oft-repeated reminders to those gathered on Sunday mornings help provide at least a context for their understanding of what worship is and an expectation of Christ’s role in worship. Worship pastors and leaders can remind congregants:

- Worship is like a rhythm: God reveals himself to us in Christ through his holy Word, and by faith, we respond.
- In our corporate worship, we gather to become more like the One we worship.
- In our worship, we are reminded of what is really real—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The above phrases, coupled with worship elements that reflect the reality of a divine dialogue taking place between the God of the universe and his redeemed, may help congregants grasp the meaning and purpose of the gathering.

2. *A Vision for the Worshiper’s Work in Worship.* Concerning the responsibility of the worshiper, Cruse emphasizes that worship is the “greatest work His redeemed people could ever take up in the created world,” and

⁸Jonathan Cruse, *What Happens When We Worship?* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2020), 3.

that “worship is meaningful—not because of what we do but because of what God is doing in and through us by His Spirit.”⁹ How often are people reminded at the beginning of worship that the next sixty to seventy-five minutes are the most important, eternally significant minutes that they will have in the ensuing six days? Do the people gathered for worship know, as Cruse emphasizes, that worship is “the greatest work His redeemed people could ever take up in the created world?”¹⁰ What does Cruse mean when he writes, “the greatest work God’s people could ever do”? In Frank Senn’s capacious volume, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*, the Lutheran pastor and liturgical scholar clarifies in the following way the complex, unwieldy English word *worship* and the importance of worship being both the “work” of Christ and the work of the people:

A word that comes closer to incorporating both the divine and the human participation in worship is *leitourgia*. Originally this term came out of the realm of law and politics. It meant a service that was rendered on the people’s behalf by a representative; hence it is composed from words for work (*ergon*) and public (*leitōs*).... Thus, “leitourgia” describes the high priestly work of Christ as well as the work of the people of God on earth.¹¹

A beautiful example of the link between the works of God and the work of response from his people through worship can be found in Psalm 66. God’s works are “awe-inspiring,” and he wields “great strength” (v 3). Later in verses 6 and 7, God’s mighty works are recounted: “He turned the sea into dry land,” and he “rules forever by his might.” In response to God and his glorious works, the people of God “shout joyfully” and “sing about the glory of his name,” and say, “How awe-inspiring are your works!” The psalmist also charges the worshipers to “come and see the wonders of God,” and to “bless our God, you peoples; let the sound of his praise be heard.” (Ps 66:1-3, 5, 8). There is an intentionality rooted in the worship of the psalmist as he praises God for his mighty acts and then prescribes the active, authentic response from a grateful, awe-filled people. As Don Carson writes in the classic *Worship by the Book*,

⁹Cruse, *What Happens When We Worship?*, 86, 88.

¹⁰Cruse, *What Happens When We Worship?*, 86.

¹¹Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 34.

There are far too few choruses and services and sermons that expand our vision of God—his attributes, his works, his character, his words [I]f you wish to deepen the worship of the people of God, above all deepen their grasp of his ineffable majesty in his person and in all his works.¹²

Throughout the Bible, God's people respond to God, not to the form or structure of worship, not to the activity of worship itself, not to the musical instruments accompanying the worship of the Psalms, and never to the psalmist encouraging the response: "Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory because of your faithful love, because of your truth" (Ps 115:1).

II. IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP, TRANSFORMATION IS NOT JUST POSSIBLE, IT IS INEVITABLE

The apostle Paul exploded with praise in the middle of his letter to the church at Rome: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom 11:36). Then he followed with this admonition: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God" (italics added, Rom 12:1-2). In the festschrift honoring Timothy George, Frank Thielman connects transformation with renewing the mind:

Paul's use of the expressions "transform" (*metamorphoo*) and "renewal of" the "mind" (*noos*) recall...how believers now "set their minds (*phronousin*) on the things of the Spirit" (Rom 8:5) and are predestined "to be conformed (*symmorphous*) to the image" of God's Son (Rom 8:29).¹³

Conformity to the image of Christ is essentially the litmus test of effective worship. However, do church attenders grasp the reality that

¹²D. A. Carson, "Worship Under the Word," in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 31.

¹³Frank Thielman, "Worship in the New Testament," in *Worship, Tradition, and Engagement: Essays Honoring Timothy George*, ed. David S. Dockery, James Earl Massey, and Robert Smith Jr., (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018), 71.

God's desire for his people and purpose for worship is transformation into Christ's image as their minds are renewed through the elements of the gathering? When worship leaders initiate Sunday morning meetings with a Scripture-driven, captivating, compelling vision for what worship is, hearts and minds are *renewed* and God's people are *transformed*.

Unfortunately, many worship leaders have been taught that the effectiveness of a worship service is based primarily on the musical energy they can draw out of their musicians on stage and the people in the pews. Church musicians should indeed strive to produce excellent, un-distracting music and cultivate artistic expressions of musical lines that highlight the texts of biblically rich songs and hymns. There needs to be a growing awareness of the aesthetic atmosphere that fosters a sense of sacred space, both aurally and visually for the worshiper. But music, technology, architecture, artistic interpretation, musicianship, and traditions are limited in their power to transform worshipers if Christ and his Word through the power of the Holy Spirit are not the primary means and the ultimate goal of the gathering. Christ-centered, God-glorifying, Holy Spirit-empowered, biblically saturated worship fosters the ultimate purpose of music in the service—providing the glorious and powerful corporate response to the self-revealing God while people are being transformed into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ.

While God is worthy of “all that is within”¹⁴ his people as they worship and adore him, an atmosphere of praise that is mediated by music, technology, or even tradition, has very little life-transforming power. The worship of God's people is acceptable to him through Christ alone. Matthew records Jesus saying, “All things have been entrusted to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son desires to *reveal* him” (italics added, Matt 11:27). In his Gospel, John also illumines the disclosing nature of Jesus to those who love (worship) him: “The one who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. And the one who loves me will be loved by my Father. I also will love him and will *reveal* myself to him” (italics mine, John 14:21). These passages provide a vitally important foundation for those who lead worship: God is self-revealing. He discloses himself to his redeemed. Christ's own disclosure of himself to those who worship him is the ultimate trigger for all worship. There is no need for a ministry leader to conjure up a sense of excitement

¹⁴Line from Joachim Neander's, “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,” verse 4.

or badger people to “sing louder” or clap more often. Worship leaders who rely on the reality of God’s self-revelation trust in the constant mediation and intercession of Christ (Heb 7:25). They are aware of the presence and empowering of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26) and rely on the power of the Word of God that does not return void (Isa 55:11).

When worship leaders and worshipers judge the effectiveness of the worship based on their emotional temperature elevated by a particular sound or atmosphere, they are actually worshipping worship. The misguided efforts of the leaders to seek a congregation’s response through the energy of the music derails the pathway to transformation. Jesus never says, “Have a pep rally in my honor.” He does clearly tell his people to “Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30). What Jesus asks of worshipers is that they come to him knowing their need of him. As Jesus is both the end and the means of worship, a worship leader that instructs congregants to an activity (singing or clapping) without that action being attached to a purposeful response to the self-revealing God, causes not only a misguided vision for worship, but worse, it triggers the worshiper to judge the efficacy of the worship on their own emotional temperature.

When Jesus is intentionally at the center of worship and congregants respond to his voice through his Word in the power of the Holy Spirit, transformation takes place in the worshipers whose “minds’ attention and hearts’ affection are riveted on Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of their faith.”¹⁵

III. WORSHIPING GOD IN THE SPACE BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

Casting a vision for God’s people to embrace the mystery of spiritually entering a sacred space between heaven and earth as they gather on Sunday mornings is vital for a fully orbed understanding of Christian worship. A space is not made sacred by architecture or a room’s designation as a “worship center” because Jesus liberated worship from a particular location in his discourse with the woman at the well in John 4. While believers

¹⁵This phrase is often used by students who studied under esteemed Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary worship theologian, Bruce Leafblad, based on the passage from Hebrews 12:2.

ultimately worship everywhere they breathe, evangelicals may be in danger of having lost a sense of sacred space in which spiritual transformation can occur simply because they have not been reminded of who they join and where they are during worship. Again, leaders must cast vision for not only “what” worship is and “how” it should be done, but also “who” it is they unite with as they worship.

IV. JOINING BROTHERS AND SISTERS ACROSS SPACE AND TIME

Because of God’s omniscience through space and his omnipresence throughout time, biblically regulated worship has transformational potential when the congregation is more keenly aware that they join with a “heavenly throng.”¹⁶ Cruse writes, “When the immense and infinite Holy Spirit fills us we are united to all other Christians, no matter where they are and no matter when they were.”¹⁷ Worship is so much bigger than any one person or any single church. Casting a vision for the global and heavenly reality of a congregation, uniting with voices beyond their own, fosters the wonder and mystery of a sacred space. In John the Revelator’s vision, the voices in heaven and earth join together in praise to the Lamb: “I heard every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth, on the sea, and everything in them say, ‘Blessing and honor and glory and power be to the one seated on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!’” (Rev 5:13).

V. WE MEET WITH CHRIST IN HEAVEN

The author of Hebrews sheds specific light on the actual spiritual “place” where worship happens: “We have this kind of high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister of the sanctuary and the true tabernacle that was set up by the Lord and not man” (Heb 8:1-2). As God’s people intentionally gather for corporate worship, they are wonderfully and mysteriously connected by the Holy Spirit into a heavenly and sacred space.¹⁸ Weekly worship can be much more meaningful when believers are reminded of their connection to the universal church and the ongoing worship in heaven.

Casting a vision for worship connected spiritually to the global church and the heavenlies is not escapism. While believers live in and come to

¹⁶From John Rippon’s “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name,” stanza 4.

¹⁷Cruse, *What Happens When We Worship?*, 77.

¹⁸Cruse, *What Happens When We Worship?*, 42.

worship from a fallen world, glorious glimpses of heavenly worship (Rev 4 and 5) point faithful congregants to what is yet to come, blessing them with a realistic lens of perspective as they live in the here and now. As Ross so encouragingly exhorts, “When we who are redeemed realize that in praise we are joining companies of angels whose praise transcends all that runs counter to God, then we begin to understand the reality that makes sense out of life.”¹⁹

VI. CONCLUSION

How do ministry leaders prevent the weekly gathering of their faithful from devolving into a mundane, routine meeting? Predictable traditionalism that borders on boring is no less a concern than innovative energy under the banner of excitement.²⁰ But of any people on the planet, those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb should worship with every fiber of their being. The worship experience on Sunday mornings should be some of the most meaningful, heart-stirring, emotional, challenging, thoughtful, probing, reflective, and transformational moments in the life of a believer. And this can happen when those who gather are encouraged to realize that the God of the universe has invited them to see him, engage with him, respond to him, and become more like his Son. Those who attend this potentially life-transforming meeting need to be stirred with a vision of not only who has called them to worship, but with a vision for their contribution, the sacrificial work of praise. And not only is the offering of praise the most important work the believer will do, but it is transformational in the process. As the faithful gather and worship in spirit and truth, they begin to look more like the One who created them and redeemed them.

When faithful followers of Jesus look more and more like him because they have worshiped him rightly, the world will attack even more vehemently. But the church proclaims the never-ending, never-dulling message of Jesus that she will declare until Christ returns: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). In her worship, the church continues to hear his voice as he declares, “Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (Rev 22:7). As churches gather in tandem with the ongoing worship in heaven, they continue to proclaim with the Spirit, “Come!” Let

¹⁹Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 488.

²⁰Carson, “Worship Under the Word,” 33.

anyone who hears, say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who desires take the water of life as a gift" (Rev 22:17). There is eternally significant vision attached to each of those calls and proclamations. May ministry leaders recapture a glorious vision for the weekly gathering expressed in the text of Robert Robinson's beloved hymn.

Come, thou Fount of every blessing;
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
sung by flaming tongues above;
praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
mount of God's unchanging love!²¹

²¹Robert Robinson, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing."