

CONNECTING RITUAL AND WORSHIP

Mark D. Rhoads, D.M.A.
Bethel University

Over the past thirty years there has been a resurgence of interest in worship, or more accurately, an interest in what we have come to call worship, namely the shape and substance of the Sunday-morning gathering of Christians. This interest has been motivated by a perceived need for renewal. Reformers viewed the older Sunday-morning rituals as hackneyed, leaving parishioners uninvolved and yawning, disconnected from the meaning of the rituals and more importantly disconnected from a sense of God's presence. In addition they felt that the old ways were unattractive to the unchurched and as such were an impediment to evangelism. To answer these concerns reformers introduced a "contemporary" style with livelier music, lighter sermons, and informal clothing in an effort to be "seeker sensitive."

Unfortunately, this hopeful antidote to old-fashioned forms raised a firestorm of complaints, and differences of opinion formed mostly along generational lines. While youth took to the new music with enthusiasm, older Christians found it difficult to adapt to sweeping changes. So, for thirty years the church has struggled with and argued over what has come to be called "worship style." While other elements of church services have been part of the discussion, musical style has been at the heart of this debate. As more and more congregations have accepted contemporary music, heated debate has subsided to an uneasy truce. Separate services based mainly on musical style have served to placate the warring factions.

In our furious debate over ritual forms and what musical style is most appropriate for our gatherings we have set aside more important issues to squabble over lesser things and in the squabbling, have lost our way. Our distraction over music, like all historic debates over ritual, exposes our lack of knowledge of what worship is and what part our singing and ceremony play in worship.

Defining Practice

From my youth I have associated the word *worship* with what happens at church on Sunday morning because we called our Sunday-morning gathering a "worship service." In America the word *worship* has always been connected with either the traditional gathering of Christians on Sunday morning, known as "public worship," or gatherings outside the Sunday event such as revival meetings and prayer meetings often referred to in the nineteenth century as "social worship."

The current meaning of *worship*, implied by modern usage among conservative evangelicals, is, perhaps, the most confining in the history of the word: it refers to a time of singing with perhaps some readings from scripture or extemporized prayer, *within* the Sunday-morning gathering or at other specified times. Some who advocate these special

times of “worship” suggest that God’s presence can be evoked in this context, quoting “God inhabits praise” or “Come into His presence with singing...” for support. *Worship* according to this definition is separate from other elements of the gathering such as the sermon or the offering.

What is troubling about this narrowed usage of the word *worship* is that its meaning is wrongly defined by practice. To many Christians, young people especially, *worship* happens in this special time of singing and is the reason for gathering, a notion not supported in the New Testament, for nowhere in the Epistles are gatherings described as times to worship as we currently use the term. The meaning of *worship* is further confounded by its association with other words. Some churches say they are engaged in “worship evangelism.” Entrepreneurs stage ticketed “worship events” featuring “worship bands” playing “worship music.” Churches use direct mailing and radio commercials to advertise a menu of “worship styles” designed to make the church attractive. The use of *worship* in these ways defines the word so potently that it clouds the deeper meaning seen throughout the Old and New Testaments.

The success attained by many large churches who have adopted the accoutrements of “contemporary worship” and who offer a menu of services based on musical style has hidden some disturbing outcomes. The marketing of service styles, for instance, suggests that churchgoers are consumers and indeed many do “shop” for the service that meets their expectations. Furthermore, musicians, some of them young and inexperienced in the faith, have been charged with the mission to make worship “happen” with music as though worship could be behaviorally manipulated through song. Music has become a kind of sacrament to many—God comes down to the right music.

The unfortunate result of offering a menu of services to please different groups with different musical preferences is the bifurcation of the church along generational lines so that young and old don’t mix like they used to. This leaves older folks without the support and spark of youth and the younger ones without an example and teacher. In short, it subverts a key element of Christian life so thoroughly outlined in the Epistles—the Christian community. In this regard Harold Best suggests that “It is ironic—worse, scripturally troublesome—to see local assemblies broken into groups, each doing its own niche worship, for that is all it really seems to be.”¹

Living Sacrifice

Whenever we use the word *worship* to describe a gathering or ceremony or special time and then go so far as to pander to the musical preferences of different parts of the congregation, we pervert its biblical meaning and thus invite wrong thinking about what worship is, where it takes place, and the purpose of ritual in our gatherings. Israel was continually confused about the relationship between the ritual and the worship of God. The Old Testament speaks of it frequently. In one instance God rebukes his people through Amos for attending religiously and proudly to the ceremonial forms but treating the poor unjustly:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
I cannot stand your assemblies.

¹ Harold Best. *Unceasing Worship*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003, p. 74.

Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
 I will not accept them.
 Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
 I will have no regard for them.
 Away with the noise of your songs!
 I will not listen to the music of your harps.
 But let justice roll on like a river,
 righteousness like a never-failing stream!
 (from Amos 4 and 5, NIV)

What God wanted from his people, and this is made clear many times throughout the Old Testament, was not slavish or superstitious adherence to the ceremonial law and ritual; not a proud spirit about how well they were doing the ritual, but their broken and contrite hearts, lives of service to others out of gratefulness for deliverance, first from Egypt, and also from the bondage of sin.

Both the Old and New Testaments support a singular meaning for *worship*. David Peterson points out that ritual in the Old Testament is “set within a broader framework of teaching about life under the rule of God;” and that a comprehensive theology of worship after an examination of the entire Bible “expresses the dimensions of a life orientation or total relationship with the true and living God.”² The Apostle Paul sums it up in his letter to the Romans. After a long and careful explanation of God’s grace and mercy toward them he says:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:1,2 NIV)

What follows this passage is the most telling of all. From here on Paul does not give elaborate instruction on how to perform new Christian rituals; instead, he instructs the Romans on how to live out their faith in the body of Christ.

Taken together, evidence from the Old and New Testaments suggests that true worship is separate from the rituals we call *worship*. True worship in the biblical context is our grateful response to God’s mercy toward us; and the form of that worship is *a sacrificial life of obedience to God in the context of the believing community*.

Like all followers of God throughout the centuries, we are prone to substitute religious ceremony for true worship; and entering into this fallacy is all the more likely when our leaders support a wrong understanding by using the word *worship* to describe a limited ceremonial form, then place a spotlight on that form by using it as a marketing tool and by allowing it to be the object of heated debate.

Teaching and Reminding

The relationship between ritual and worship is clear in the Scriptures: ritual and symbol were always a means of *promoting* true worship. They were designed to teach and remind the people of God’s mercy in deliverance so that they would respond with a life dedicated to serving God.

² David Peterson. *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992, p. 18.

Through ritual and symbol God provided a potent way of learning, knowing, and remembering vital precepts. Joshua 4: 20-24 contains a vivid example. After the people of Israel had crossed the Jordan River God told Joshua to choose twelve men, one from each tribe, to go back into the riverbed and pick up one stone each, a stone for each of the twelve tribes. These stones were taken to Gilgal and set up as a monument. Then in verse 21 it says, “When children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, ‘What are these stones?’ then you shall inform your children saying, ‘Israel crossed this Jordan on dry ground.’” This monument stood as a symbol of deliverance for future generations.

This scene of a curious child asking for explanation is repeated many times in the first books of the Old Testament, especially in discussions of the feasts. You can imagine the family camping out in a homemade hut during the Feast of Booths and the children asking why they did this. The father explains that this yearly ritual reminds them of their deliverance from Egypt and the forty years in the wilderness. They don’t just talk about deliverance or memorize a recitation. They relive deliverance. In the Exodus narrative Moses describes the Passover celebration and the Feast of Unleavened Bread as an ordinance for future generations before he tells about the crossing of the Red Sea. God meant for the people to remember the story of deliverance and the method he ordained was ritual reenactment. All of the feasts—Passover, Tabernacles, Weeks, First Fruits—were important in the education of children and as a constant reminder to adults of God’s goodness and the need to follow after God.

Think of the sacrifices and all their elaborate ritual, all leading up to the Day of Atonement. “God forgives sin” is the message they communicated. The tabernacle and later the temple were deeply layered with meaning. They were constructed in such a way that from our vantage point we see Christ and salvation typified in the exquisite detail of walls, veil, alter, table, lamp stand, and the Ark of the Covenant. But even without this perspective there was potent visual and ritualistic symbol to instruct and to remind godly Hebrew worshipers and their children of the ways of God.

The Psalms—the songs sung at formal feasts and in the field—embodied rich knowledge of God’s acts on Israel’s behalf and the strong emotions of praise and lament in compact, potent, artistic form. The Hallel Psalms (113-118) sung at Passover and thereby memorized by every Hebrew child speak of deliverance and praise. Psalm 137, filled with sorrow and even anger, is a reminder of the Babylonian captivity and serves as catharsis and warning.

The future of the Hebrew nation depended on obedience and following after God and his ways. “So keep the words of this covenant to do them, that you may prosper and do well.” (Deut. 29:9) God used artistic forms to convey the meaning of his commands. The artistic forms were there to “read.” Their meanings were life saving if they could be recalled and pondered and acted upon.

Symbol, ritual, feast, and psalm did not guarantee the peace and safety of the Hebrew people. We know that they often lapsed into the belief that just keeping the feasts, doing the ritual, would save them. The children of Israel were carted off more than once into captivity by foreign conquerors because of disobedience stemming, in part, from a failure to recognize the embodied meanings in the ritual forms. Israel struggled with this right up to the coming of Messiah as the Pharisees continued to strictly observe the ceremonial law but missed the point of it.

God's insistence on the careful carrying out of the rituals was for a purpose that often became cloudy to the Jews. The rituals were potent symbols and reminders of God's grace and deliverance and their potency would be diminished if they were altered or done without thinking. When they were done rightly and thoughtfully their purpose was worked out in right living, grace, mercy, and charity in the community—loving your neighbor as yourself. The sinner, aware of God's grace and forgiveness, extends grace and forgiveness and love to others, “for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.” (Romans 13:8b NIV)

For the Strengthening of the Church

The Jews at Pentecost who heard Peter explain from the Prophets that Jesus was the promised Messiah and their Savior, were convicted of their sins. They asked what they should do. This is curious given that all Jews knew that elaborate sacrifices were required for the forgiveness of sin. It must have been overwhelming as these believing Jews took in the meaning of a final sacrifice in Christ. Peter's answer signaled a monumental change:

Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ [their Messiah] for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you and to your children, and even to the Gentiles—all who have been called by the Lord our God. (Acts 2:38,39 New Living Translation)

Christ was now the focal point, the “new and living way” to God. As the epistle to the Hebrews points out, all of the purposes of the rituals and feast are fulfilled in him. The writer of Hebrews makes it clear (10:17-23) that our sins are forgiven once for all since Christ was the full and final sacrifice; and we can come before God with confidence and assurance of faith because we are cleansed of a guilty conscience. Then the writer adds what is and always was the proper response to being forgiven: “And let us consider how we may spur *one another* on toward love and good deeds” (10:24). Here we see in the New Testament the important theme laced throughout the Old Testament: God loves us and forgives sin; we should love and forgive one another. Jesus said it clearly and succinctly: Love each other as I have loved you.

In the days after Pentecost we get a small glimpse into what the Jewish believers did in the absence of the prescribed rituals:

They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together constantly and shared everything they had. They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47).

We see them meeting as usual in the Temple courts to observe Jewish feast days and daily hours (until they were eventually excluded) as well as perhaps discussing “the new and living way” with curious non-believers. In addition we see the beginnings of new

rituals, ones that we observe today such as hearing the apostles teaching (teaching from the Word), celebrating the Lord's Supper, and praying and praising God together. We also see the outworking of their faith in the community of believers as they generously and joyfully shared meals and provided for those in need. And we see God adding to their number, perhaps as an outgrowth of their love for one another.

As the church grew and spread, the early improvised rituals that emerged out of Christian gatherings took shape and became more and more formalized. These included prayer, praise, teaching, preaching, prophecy ("a word from the Lord"), interpreted tongues, singing (associated with teaching/praise), the Lord's Supper, baptism. And to carry out the mandate to "consider how we may spur *one another* on toward love and good deeds" we hear the apostles urging believers to encourage one another, build one another up, exhort one another, meet one another's needs, and love one another, because community is all important to the outworking and the continuance of our faith.

We know about these rituals and practices, not because the New Testament leaves clear instructions on how to perform them, but because the writers of the Epistles report on them or clarify their use; the rite of the Lord's Supper, for instance, was one of the most important early rituals; and right away the Corinthian church began to abuse the practice to the point that the Apostle Paul sharply rebukes them and sets them straight.

In the context of instructing the Corinthian church on orderliness when they gathered, Paul says something very important; something that should be considered as we plan and carry out any Christian ritual or practice when we gather. "What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation." And then he adds a very important closing sentence—the key to straightening out our understanding of what we are to do when we gather: "But everything that is done must be useful to all and build them up in the Lord." (I Corinthians 14:26 NLT) In another translation (NIV) it says that everything must be done "for the strengthening of the church." Clearly he is saying that *everything* done in the gathering of believers must correct, instruct, and encourage believers in a life oriented toward God. Like in the Old Testament, we see here the Scriptural relationship between ritual and worship: Everything we do in our gatherings must point us toward the door and send us out to live a life in obedience to God—a life of worship—in the Christian community and the world beyond.

The Power of Ritual in the 21st Century Church

Where near-sighted adherence to "contemporary" or "traditional" or "blended worship" has limited what might happen when we gather, a biblical understanding of the place of ritual in true worship opens the door to a wide variety of practices provided that they are "for the strengthening of the church." Our rituals and practices must teach us and remind us of God's mercy and grace. If what we do in our gatherings is to propel us toward a life relationship with God and a life of service among God's people and the world, then an active and meaningful encounter with God's truth should always be the goal. Songs are chosen with this in mind, Scripture readings are chosen with this in mind, the sermon is prepared with this in mind, the liturgy is constructed and said with this in mind, Sunday school is set up with this in mind; buildings are planned, chairs are arranged, banners are hung, small groups are conceived, church dinners are prepared with this in mind. This

mandate allows for high liturgy or Pentecostal informality, jazz or Bach, vestments or t-shirts. In the end the most important question is Will the gathering strengthen the believers present, the body of Christ? Did it rebuke, warn, tell of God's greatness, underline his love, teach principles of holy living? When we leave the gathering, will what we did prepare us for a life of obedience to God in the context of Christian community?

Some might wonder if this single-minded, rather objective purpose might suggest a diminishing or even outlawing of emotional displays in Christian gatherings. Certainly not. Emotional reactions are expected in respond to God's truth. If we focus on rehearsing the full expanse of the prophetic Word of God , those emotions could range from discomfort upon being rebuked, to rest and comfort as we ponder God's love, to ecstasy over full redemption. Outburst of "amen" might be heard or the sound of someone crying. Some may hear and feel nothing out of the ordinary but simple assent (or rejection). Some may fall asleep. All of these emotions and reactions may be represented in any one gathering.

The only caution about emotion is that it must *not* be the goal. We must not count on raising a certain emotional aura to tell us whether or not we have "worshipped." Counting on or planning for a cookie-cutter "worshipful" response is like expecting everyone to have the same reaction to eating lima beans. Some love them. Some hate them. Some may learn to love them. Some regard them as comfort food. Others experience only disgust. Emotions and reactions are ephemeral; but God's Word is eternal; "sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12, NIV).

Those who see Sunday-morning gatherings (the gathering traditionally for believers) as a tool for evangelism must also not abandon the goal of doing all for the strengthening of the church. What is good for the believer to hear is good for the unbeliever as well. What could be more powerful in the mind of an unbeliever than hearing the clear, prophetic Word of God in a gathering of believers who are attentive to the truth? The Apostle Paul speaks of this in his correcting of the Corinthian church on orderliness with regard to speaking in tongues in the gathering of believers:

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, *he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"* (1 Corinthians 14:23-25, NIV, emphasis mine)

Here unbelievers are convicted as they hear the Word declared in a gathering of believers. We must recall that it was Charles Finney, the dynamic evangelist of the 1820s and 30s who convinced us that we needed "new measures" to win people to Christ—high drama, special services, traveling evangelists. In sharp contrast Jonathan Edwards in the First Great Awakening and Asahel Nettleton³ in the Second Great Awakening simply pointed congregations (the "wheat and the tares") to the prophetic truths of Scripture. The

³ see John F. Thornbury. *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*. Durham, UK: Evangelical Press, 1977.

response was genuine and lasting. Modern evangelist should ask whether or not the Holy Spirit can be trusted to call and convict sinners; and those who are so ardent to fill churches that they resort to marketing surveys and advertising techniques should consider teaching the Word, encouraging Christian community, and letting the Holy Spirit “add to their number those who are being saved.”

The early church struggled with unity much as we do. The gaps between Christians in these new congregations were enormous, but Greeks and Jew, men and women, slaves and their owners came together in community as fellow heirs in the body of Christ. In the face of disunity the Apostle Paul points out that in the new creation “there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all (Col 3:11, KJV).” The miracle was that through the power of the Holy Spirit the wall of separation came down. What separates us? Do we dare admit that one of the major walls between evangelicals is something as trivial as preference for a certain so-called “worship style” marked primarily by traditional, or ethnic, or contemporary music? Offering separate services based on musical style must end in the name of community. Instead, young and old, the hip and not-so-hip must stand side by side as they pray and praise and hear the Word of God. Musical style that has been wrongly elevated in current practice must be brought into submission to outstanding texts. The words we sing must be continually and carefully examined. They must coherently speak the truth about God by way of instruction, prayer, and praise. The tunes and accompaniments to which they are sung play an important but subservient role, one of interpreter and supporter of textual meaning. When the words and their meaning come first, musical style becomes less important, allowing any style as long as its use does not cloud, but enhances the meaning of the text.

Like the ceremonial ritual of the Israelites, our gatherings with their varied rituals with their sermons or liturgy or song are not an end in themselves. These are all servants to a higher calling: the ultimate offering of our lives to God in faith out of gratitude for unmerited grace and redemption. This is the only acceptable offering when the rituals have ended.