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Worship is the exercise of the mind in the contemplation of God in which wonder and awe play an important part in stretching and enlarging our vision, or in opening upon our conceptual forms to take in that which by its nature far outruns them. That is why worship goes together with the kerygmatic activity in proclamation whereby we are directed by ostensive acts of reference far beyond ourselves to "the mighty acts of God."

THOMAS F. TORRANCE, "POSTSCRIPT: THEOLOGICAL PERSUASION" IN *GOD AND RATIONALITY* (LONDON, ENGLAND: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997), 204-205.

The cult, celebrated *hic et nunc* in a specific way by the Christian Church, is the concrete and vicarious (or substitutionary) expression of the deep meaning and the essential attitude of the whole cosmos, which is, the expression of uninterrupted adoration of the living God by the whole of creation.

OTTO HAENDLER

## WORSHIP AND THE WORD

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*Ron Man*

The Word of God is of supreme importance in the life of the Christian, containing as it does God's revelation of his person, his will, and his ways. The Word needs to be pored over, ingested into one's mind and heart, meditated on, and acted upon. It is a unique and precious repository of spiritual truth, guidance, and encouragement. There is no aspect of the life of the church or of the individual believer that should not be tied to a scriptural mooring and infused with biblical substance (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible is indeed "a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

When Christians gather for corporate worship, it is logical that the Word of God should play a central and dominant role. Since worship involves focusing our thoughts and hearts and voices on the praise of God, in response to his self-revelation and his gracious saving initiative, we need that view of God which the Word alone gives us if our worship is to be "in truth" (John 4:23-24). Our worship can only duly honor God if it accurately reflects what he reveals about himself in his Word.

John Stott explains in this way the crucial importance of the Word for worship:

To worship God . . . is to "glory in his holy name" (Psalm 105:3), that is, to revel adoringly in who he is in his revealed character. But before we can glory in God's name, we must

know it. Hence the propriety of the reading and preaching of the Word of God in public worship, and of biblical meditation in private devotion. These things are not an intrusion into worship; they form the necessary foundation of it. God must speak to us before we have any liberty to speak to him. He must disclose to us who he is before we can offer him what we are in acceptable worship. The worship of God is always a response to the Word of God. Scripture wonderfully directs and enriches our worship.<sup>1</sup>

Worship is often understood as a dialogue of revelation and response between God and his people.<sup>2</sup> If that is true, then obviously *both* sides of the equation must be present.<sup>3</sup>

So far so good. However, there are today some imbalances in churches' understanding of the Word's proper role in worship. Two of these will be discussed below.

### THE WORD "VERSUS" WORSHIP?

#### The Relationship of Preaching and Corporate Praise

There are a lot of churches where there is a continuing conflict over the proper relationship of preaching and "worship" (an unhappy and inaccurate dichotomy) in church services.

"Preliminaries" and Preaching. James A. White and other church historians have pointed out that many American congregations in the Protestant free church tradition can trace their present worship practices to nineteenth-century revivalism,<sup>4</sup> where music and other activities functioned merely as (and were even called) "preliminaries," designed as a way to "warm up" the audience for the "main event," i.e., the message. As White demonstrates, this pattern, which was widely used for evangelistic meetings, was then carried over into worship services. Sadly, that view of the worship service is alive and well today. Even in those churches where Bible teaching has come to take precedence

over evangelistic-style preaching, it is now the teaching of the Bible which is seen as the primary if not sole purpose for gathering.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere I have explained how this is a narrow view which can rob our corporate services of the richness which Jesus Christ can bring to them in the fullness of his mediatorial role: mediating the truth of God to man, and mediating the worship response of God's people as our High Priest (Hebrews 2:17; 4:14-15; 5:5; 7:26-28; 8:1-2; 9:11-12; 10:19-22).<sup>6</sup>

There is also a great deal of semantic confusion involved in this controversy. To begin with, worship must be understood in its broadest New Testament sense as that which should be a life-pervading, non-localized response of the believer to the gracious work of God in the life (Romans 12:1; John 4:21-23); all of life, all of our activities are to be done for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31) and in the name of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17). In fact, all Christian ministry (including preaching) should have as its ultimate aim the fulfillment of the Great Commandment (Mark 12:28-30), to evoke *more and better worship* on the part of people to whom that ministry is directed. Only worship is an end in itself, an ultimate end.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps "corporate praise" would be a more appropriate term to use in referring to those non-preaching, participatory parts of the service (since "worship" is so global a category, and since *all* of what happens in the service, including preaching, should be termed worship<sup>8</sup>).

Some pastors hold to what is in fact a false dichotomy between the roles served by preaching and corporate praise: that the former handles the Word of God while the latter consists simply of singing and such activities. Similarly, in discussions about the revelation/response paradigm that characterizes worship, it is sometimes assumed that only in the sermon does any meaningful communication of *revelation* take place—with the obvious implication that

everything else in the service is necessarily *response*.<sup>9</sup> And that response is seen as inherently inferior to revelation<sup>10</sup> (presumably because revelation comes from God, while response is of man).

But in fact, the Word of God can be and *should* be communicated (explicitly and implicitly) *throughout* the service; a back-and-forth dialogue, between the Word and the people's response to it, should be an ongoing aspect of the entire service. As Bruce Leafblad puts it:

People don't hear God speak with an audible voice on Sunday morning. . . . God has appointed spokespersons. . . . He's been appointing people, not to tell what they think, but to speak what *he* thinks. And that's why we are people of the Book; and that's why the Word must be integrated into the entire service of worship, not just be an act for preaching. The conversation depends on the Word at every point where God speaks in the dialogue . . . . God isn't limited to one medium of communication.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, *response* is not an inferior and negligible part of worship. Indeed, God's revelation is prerequisite and foundational to any response; but the fact is that, since Christ mediates *both* the revelation and response parts of worship,<sup>12</sup> they are both of immense value. The High Priestly ministry of Jesus in our worship governs and guides both aspects and gives to both an incredible (and complementary) significance.

In spite of (or at least in ignorance of) the points mentioned above, many pastors still feel that an elevating of the importance of "worship" (or corporate praise) necessarily means a degrading of the importance of the Word of God and of preaching.

**Preaching Serves Worship.** Preaching is an integral part of the revelatory side of the dialogue of worship. For

the preacher (as others in the service who communicate scriptural truth to the people) *represents God in the dialogue*.<sup>13</sup> He plays a theological role of representing "the God who convenes worship."<sup>14</sup>

John Stott insists on this inseparable connection between preaching and worship:

Word and worship belong indissolubly to each other. All worship is an intelligent and loving response to the revelation of God, because it is the adoration of his Name. Therefore, acceptable worship is impossible without preaching. For preaching is making known the Name of the Lord, and worship is praising the Name of the Lord made known. Far from being an alien intrusion into worship, the reading and preaching of the word are actually indispensable to it. The two cannot be divorced. Indeed, it is their unnatural divorce that accounts for the low level of so much contemporary worship. Our worship is poor because our knowledge of God is poor, and our knowledge of God is poor because our preaching is poor. But when the Word of God is expounded in its fullness, and the congregation begin to glimpse the glory of the living God, they bow down in solemn awe and joyful wonder before his throne.<sup>15</sup>

In order for worship to be filled with the wonder of God, that wonder must be displayed through the reading and exposition of the mighty acts and ways of God as related to us in Scripture. That's why John Piper refers to preaching as "expository exultation."<sup>16</sup> Preaching should marvel in the greatness of the glory of God, so that our present circumstances and our worries and our worship are all submitted to the "mighty hand of God." Worship acknowledges that God is an all-powerful, all-loving heavenly Father who glorifies himself by satisfying his people.<sup>17</sup>

The ascription of praise with which a Chrysostom, an Augus-

tine, or a Calvin ended their sermons was no mere formality: It indicated the intention of the sermon itself and its aim of bringing others also to the praise of God on account of what had been proclaimed in Scripture and sermon.<sup>18</sup>

Preaching is crucial for God-saturated, God-honoring worship.<sup>19</sup> And worship is the end and goal of preaching, as is the entire service. Hence Piper's view of preaching as "expository exultation"—faithful exposition is not the end, but rather a means to achieving the goal of a worship response ("exultation") to the God thus seen. The preacher must preach as an act of worship (because, after all, "you can't commend what you don't cherish."<sup>20</sup>); and he must preach with a view toward engendering worship in others.

Vern Poythress puts this well:

We refuse to accept as scriptural a simple dichotomy between praise and preaching. Frankly we do not see how any gospel preacher with a heart in him can *refrain* from praising God as an integral part of his preaching.<sup>21</sup>

John Piper would agree: "The overarching, pervasive, relentless subject of preaching is God himself with a view to being worshiped."<sup>22</sup> "Preaching is meant to be and to kindle God-exalting worship. . . . The mission of all preaching is soul-satisfying, God-exalting worship."<sup>23</sup>

### THE WORD NEGLECTED IN WORSHIP

#### Benign Neglect in Bible-believing Churches

The astounding observation is frequently made as to just how little use is made of Scripture in the worship services of most evangelical churches. The irony, of course, is that those who claim most strongly to stand on the Bible *have so little of it in their worship*. (2 Timothy 3:15 should be more than enough warrant!) While the sermon of course

takes a prominent role in our services, even preaching consists mostly of talking *about* the Scriptures (often after reading just a very few verses). It must be said that liturgical groups (including Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics) have probably ten times as much actual Scripture in their services (because it is built into their liturgies) than do most Bible-believing, evangelical free churches!

In too many evangelical churches the entire first part of the service consists just of music—albeit songs about God and songs reflective of biblical truth (a minimum requirement for songs for worship)—but no Scripture is read at all. The problem is pervasive: I have experienced it often in both traditional and contemporary services. It seems crucially important for people in a service, believers and unbelievers, to hear read (and/or printed in a bulletin or flashed on a screen) verses of Scripture chosen to give a clear signal that: "We have come to worship God. The Word is how we know about God, and therefore it is the foundation for all that we do here and for our understanding of why we have come together." Without such a declaration—launching into songs without any context of revelation being set—worshippers make the faulty assumption (consciously or unconsciously) that we invite *ourselves* into God's presence, when in actuality it is only by virtue of his invitation (and his opening the way through the work of Christ) that we may come before him at all.

Recently I visited a church where the service consisted of five parts, clearly delineated in the bulletin. Every part of this service began with a Scripture reading that set the tone for what followed. There was no question that this church saw the central role of Scripture in their worship! As James White puts it, "the first step toward making our worship more biblical is in giving the reading of God's Word a central role in Christian worship on any occasion."<sup>24</sup>

It is impossible to overstate the importance of Scripture

for our worship. In Scripture we find the prerequisites for worship, the invitation to worship, the authority for worship, the material for worship, the regulation of our worship, the message of worship, and the end to which worship should lead. It is not simply "old-fashioned," but rather non-negotiable, that we should include calls to worship, Scripture readings, etc., in our services. By all means, let us be as creative as possible to build in Scripture (verses displayed on banners or projected onto a screen as people enter, verses on the bulletin cover, readers' theater, children reciting verses, original Scripture songs, etc.), but let us make sure that the *primacy of the Word in worship* is obvious throughout the entire service—not just during the sermon.

Scripture is read, not just for a sermon text, but to hear what word God addresses to the gathered congregation. Preaching usually builds on that but Scripture is read for its own sake as God's Word. . . . It needs to be communicated to all that the centrality of Scripture stems from its function as proclamation of God's Word to the gathered people.<sup>25</sup>

#### THE PRIMACY OF THE WORD IN WORSHIP

**The Word and the Prerequisites for Worship.** The Word of God helps to bring us to the point where our approach to God in worship is possible: it teaches us that we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1); it reveals that God has provided for redemption, forgiveness, and eternal life through the work of Jesus Christ; and it presents the opportunity to come by faith into a right relationship with the Father—to "honor him as God" (Romans 1:21).

"The washing of water with the Word" (Ephesians 5:26) provides the spiritual cleanliness which God requires for us to be able to enter confidently into his presence (Psalm 15:1-2; Hebrews 10:19-22; 12:18-24).

**The Word as the Inviter to Worship.** God has done

everything to make our approach in worship possible, and in his Word he extends the invitation (indeed, he commands his people) to draw near. The Old Testament book of worship, the Psalter, is replete with calls to "praise the Lord!" (Hebrew, *hallelujah*). The Psalmists call the people of Israel, and us as believers, to "come into his presence with singing" (100:2). The New Testament book of worship, the Epistle to the Hebrews, focuses throughout on the access we have into the presence of God through the atoning work and the present mediatorial ministry of our great High Priest, Jesus Christ; in and through him we are encouraged to draw near with confidence and boldness (4:16; 10:19-22; cf. 12:18-24).

We come, invited by your Word,  
To kneel before your altar, Lord.<sup>26</sup>

**The Word as the Authority for Worship.** In the Word of God, the Bible, we have the complete written revelation of God to man. It is divinely inspired, and thus uniquely authoritative for all that we as believers do—including worship. As has already been mentioned, worship is about God: we come to focus on him, learn more about him, express our love for him. But to do all these things intelligently and correctly, we need the Word of God as his revelation of himself and his ways. As John MacArthur has put it, "Worship is a response built upon truth. . . . Jesus himself said that true worshipers must worship in spirit and truth. . . . If we are to worship in truth and the Word of God is truth, we must worship out of our understanding of the Word of God."<sup>27</sup>

The fact of the matter is that every aspect of the service should serve to reflect and honor the Word of God. The sermon (and the preacher) must be subservient to the Word. The Word must guide and control the preacher's thoughts

and words if the sermon is to communicate God's message and not just the ideas of man. But the music must also be subservient to the Word. The texts must reflect and express biblical truth, and the music itself must be a suitable medium to carry the text. The musician(s) must also be subservient to the Word in terms of motivation and execution of the music. In addition, prayers and readings must be consistent with biblical teaching, if not actually taken from Scripture.

**The Word as the Material for Worship.** Obviously preaching is a crucial and central part of the public worship of God's people, and the above treatment should not be taken to imply otherwise. But it is too simplistic to see the sermon as the sole component of revelation in the revelation/response pattern of worship—at least it should not be, if the Word of God is allowed to infuse the service in a variety of ways, as described above. Gary Furr and Milburn Price have suggested a number of ways in which the revelation of the Word can be communicated in the service, besides the sermon: Scripture readings of all sorts, music (setting Scripture texts, and also faithfully presenting scriptural truth in paraphrased or freely composed form), symbols (fish, cross, stained glass, etc.), carefully used drama.<sup>28</sup> When Scripture and scriptural truth are pervasive in the service, then the acts of response will probably be understood as response to God's self-revelation through his Word.

If the bulletin makes it clear that Scripture is an important part of Christian worship, then we can be sure people will get the message that the Bible is crucial in shaping their lives as Christians. But, when the role of Scripture in worship is negligible, when Scripture is used only to launch a sermon, what is communicated is that the Bible is marginal in Christian life, too. The use we make or fail to make of Scripture in our worship says far more about Christian discipleship than we may realize.<sup>29</sup>

The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper likewise occur in the context and under the authority of the Word of God:

Baptism . . . ought to be seen as a dynamic response to the Word proclaimed. It is itself a non-verbal proclamation of the gospel in which we show forth with water God's will to save.

The same, of course, is true of the Lord's Supper. . . . The Lord's Supper is a powerful showing forth of the life and death, the resurrection and ascension of Christ. . . . The chief act of Christian worship for hundreds of millions of Christians has become for us a quarterly or monthly affair, frequently tacked on to the end of a preaching service. Yet preaching, too, functions best in the context of the visible word shown forth in the sacrament. The Bible calls us to take and eat and drink as well as to hear.<sup>30</sup>

**The Word as the Regulator of Worship.** When Jesus spoke of the necessity of worshipping "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24), he was coming at the issue from two sides: "Truth is the objective factor in worship, and spirit is the subjective."<sup>31</sup> (Left-brain and right-brain respectively, if you will.) The fact is (and this is what Jesus was stressing) there must be a balance between these aspects, and both must be there: worship must spring forth from the inside, from the heart (where only God can see), and be genuine and sincere (in other words, not just going through the motions); on the other hand, worship must be guided and channeled by truth, i.e., be in accordance with what God has revealed about himself and his ways (and, as John 4:25-26 shows, must be through the Son, the Messiah, who is the truth [John 15:6]).

So in worship we are to respond to God as we know him to be through his revealed Word; we are not to be

coldly orthodox, but rather are to come with enthusiasm and sincerity which are born of an intense encounter with God as he is and as he offers himself to us in Christ. Not emotion for its own sake,<sup>32</sup> but as genuine, heartfelt response to truth and all of its implications. "This is the perfect blend: emotion regulated by understanding, enthusiasm directed by the Word of God."<sup>33</sup>

**The Word and the Message of Worship.** Preaching, Piper says, is "expository exultation."<sup>34</sup> This definition brings the biblical balance of spirit and truth, emotion and intellect to the pulpit ministry of the Word. That is indeed a high and holy calling: to speak to the people on behalf of God, on the basis and authority of his Word.

The all-pervasive, all-important, all-surpassing reality in very text is God. Whether he is commanding or warning or promising or teaching he is there. And where he is, he is always supreme. And where he is supreme he will be worshiped.<sup>35</sup>

This is the message of worship. But let us not relegate that message to the preaching portion of the service alone. Rather, let it be clear in the service as a whole that we gather under the authority of the Word to learn of God from his Word (in all of its various presentations in the service) and to respond in a fashion that honors the Word and the Lord whose Word it is. May the Word of God guide us and give expression to our responses of praise and adoration, confession and trust, thanksgiving and intercession which well out of a right understanding of God's Person and ways through their revelation in the Word. May we uphold the Word, read the Word, sing the Word, meditate on the Word, preach the Word, respond to the Word, and place ourselves in submission under the precepts of the Word. May God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be glorified in our worship as we come through under, with, and to the Word.

**The Word and the End of Worship.** The Word should rightly be exalted in our worship (because it is the Word of God), but not as an end in itself. For the ultimate goal of worship (as of the church and of our lives as believers) is to display and proclaim and magnify *the glory of God*.

The glory of God will be well served in our worship as the Word speaks of the wonders of his person and his ways—through reading, preaching, praying, singing, meditating, and practicing ordinances which are infused with and reflective of scriptural truth. The Word will enable us to obey its own command to "praise him according to his surpassing greatness" (Psalm 150:2).

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#### *Notes*

1. John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 174.
2. See Gary A. Furr and Milburn Price, *The Dialogue of Worship: Creating Space for Revelation and Response* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 1998).
3. However, it should also be remembered that "the communion between God and human beings is reciprocal, but not symmetrical." (Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Praise of God in the Theological Reflection of the



- Church," *Interpretation* 39 [1985]:39).
4. James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 171-72, 177.
  5. Dr. Tim Ralston of Dallas Theological Seminary characterizes the view that only a steady and strong diet of Bible teaching is needed for growth in the Christian life as "a dysfunctional view of sanctification." On audiotape "Changing Worship—Calming the Conflict" (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1994).
  6. Ron Man, "Jesus Our Worship Leader: The Mediating Work of the Son in Worship," *Reformation and Revival* 9:2, 36-37.
  7. That worship is a bigger and broader category than preaching is clearly demonstrated by the fact that many pastors have *preached about worship*, yet it is nonsensical to think of *worshipping about preaching*; only the lesser can teach about the greater.
  8. Cf. John Piper, "Preaching as Worship: Meditations on Expository Exultation," Lecture transcripts (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Desiring God Ministries, 1994).
  9. An additional complication is the fact that, by this understanding, basically all of the response in the service would *precede* all the revelation!
  10. In all fairness, it should be pointed out that corporate praise has grown in some churches to almost sacramental proportions, to the detriment of the proclaimed Word of God; this is likewise an imbalance.
  11. Bruce Leafblad, "Leading in Worship" (audiotape, Worship Conference, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1995).
  12. "Jesus Our Worship Leader," 34-37.
  13. In another sense, the preacher represents Jesus Christ in his mediatorial ministry whereby he proclaims the Father's name to his brethren (Heb. 2:12). Cf. "Jesus Our Worship Leader," 34, 41, n.6.
  14. "Leading in Worship."
  15. John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 82-83.
  16. "Preaching as Worship," Lecture No. 1:3.
  17. Cf. John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, revised edition (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1996).
  18. "The Praise of God," 38.
  19. But it is a two-way street as well: "Maintaining the centrality of worship in the life of the church is crucial to sustaining integrity in preaching. When worship is central, preaching takes on characteristics that make it an effective means of communicating the gospel." C. Welton Gaddy, *The Gift of Worship* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992), 72.
  20. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1993), 11.
  21. Vern S. Poythress, "Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37:2 (1975):229.

22. John Piper, "Preaching as Worship," Lecture No. 2:3.
23. Lecture No. 1:4.
24. James F. White, "Making Our Worship More Biblical," *Perkins Journal* 34 (Fall 1980), 38.
25. "Making Our Worship More Biblical," 38.
26. Danish Hymn (Text by Thomas Kingo, 1634-1703).
27. John MacArthur, Jr., *The Ultimate Priority* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 122-23.
28. *The Dialogue of Worship*, 8-10, 12-15.
29. *The Dialogue of Worship*, 38.
30. *The Dialogue of Worship*, 40.
31. *The Ultimate Priority*, 125-26.
32. *The Ultimate Priority*, 124, where MacArthur cites 1 Corinthians 14:14-16 and 14: 23-25 as possible examples of this.
33. *The Ultimate Priority*, 125.
34. "Preaching as Worship."
35. "Preaching as Worship," Lecture No. 2, 2-3.