

“Worship in the Balance”

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Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is no secret that Christian churches today are interested in what it means to worship God? Look around—new books, new periodicals, new conferences and study centers, new publishing companies, new degree programs—all aimed at the study and practice of Christian worship. It is obvious that there is a strong interest and hunger for something. The pollsters would tell us that worship is definitely “in.”

But is this hunger a desire to really know and respond to the God of the Scriptures, or is it an exciting new commercial market, the latest self-help emphasis for feeling good about ourselves and our programs? Are we worship God, or are we worshipping worship, or are we *using* worship as a means to build our earthly kingdoms? These are sobering thoughts.

As planners and leaders of faithful Christian worship, we should do everything we can to read and study and pray and reflect on what it means to really worship the one true and living God.

Prayer:

Holy God, We worship you as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We thank you for revealing yourself in the holy Scriptures and we pray that you will direct us as we strive to make your Word the rule for all of life. As we consider what it means to worship you, we pray that your Holy Spirit will be our teacher, and that your greater glory will be our main concern. This we pray in the powerful name of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen

Part I: Balance and Perspective

I have entitled this address “Worship in the Balance.” Balance sounds like a great word, doesn’t it? It is thoughtful, informed and forgiving. It rings true with enlightened intentionality. It is balanced. What kind of person doesn’t want to be known as balanced? What kind of Christian leader would be opposed to a balanced approach to ministry?

Although it may sound very obvious, I want to start by suggesting that there are some ideas of “balanced” worship that we want to avoid.

First, we want to steer clear of anything that resembles a spiritual center of gravity, halfway between self-worship and divine worship. Further, we are not interested in a balance between a right view and a wrong view, or between being biblical and non-biblical (or, worse, anti-biblical). We do not

seek a balance between being mindful and mindless (thoughtful and thoughtless). We are not just seeking a compromise between differing views, or looking for a least common denominator until we find something that is not only unthreatening but also meaningless when it comes to celebrating the redeeming work of our Lord and Savior.

No, these are not the kinds of balance in worship that the local Christian church wants to pursue. Rather, we seek a view of worship that is balanced in living out some important biblical principles:

- **Celebration & Contemplation**

Worship is both exciting and meditative. It takes energy and it takes sober contemplation.

- **Intellectual & Emotional**

Worship involves facts and feelings. It engages both our heads and our hearts. Perhaps this is related to our Lord's words to the woman at the well: We are to worship "in spirit and truth."

- **Creation & Redemption**

Our worship of God is incomplete unless we adequately respond to him as the God of both Creation and Redemption—common grace and saving grace.

- **Transcendence & Immanence**

The God whom we worship is "totally other" and he is "Abba Father." He is the awesome and righteous judge who is to be feared; and he is "God with us," and the Good Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep.

- **Personal & Corporate**

Our worship must reflect the fact that we are individuals (sinners saved by grace) who have been called into a body of believers.

- **Newness and Sameness**

The message of the gospel has not changed through the centuries, but the language we use to express our adoration and confession must change. We want to be fully connected to the historic Christian faith, but careful and creative in how that faith is articulated in our world today.

- **Sin & Salvation**

Balanced Christian worship will always remember the seriousness of our sin against God's holiness. It will give believers an appropriate context to cry out for mercy and forgiveness, but will not leave us to "wallow" in our sin and guilt. Christian worship celebrates the assurance of God's pardon and forgiveness that is ours by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

The WORSHIP QUOTE OF THE WEEK—www.wqotw.org

For many years I have been exploring these areas of balance (or positive tension) in Christian worship through an Internet ministry called the WORSHIP QUOTE OF THE WEEK. These free Tuesday morning e-mail messages contain thoughtful materials that relate to a biblical view of

worship or prayer. Some are selections from the Scriptures. Some are taken from hymns or worship songs. Still others are drawn from the writings of various authors (ancient and contemporary) on the topic of Christian worship. The site includes a helpful index by author with several hundred quotes.

As we examine this idea of balanced Christian worship, we notice that the word “worship” is used in several very different ways by serious followers of Christ. Perhaps we could call these three perspectives or pictures of Christian worship.

- Lifestyle worship
- Intentional Christian gathering for acts of worship
- Inner closeness to God

Lifestyle worship is a concept that is seen throughout the Scriptures. It is a conscious acknowledging of God’s greatness and goodness in the way we live our lives, in the goals we pursue, and in the priorities we set for ourselves. Lifestyle worship is part of God’s earliest instructions to his chosen people: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4-5). It is voiced in prayer when we whole-heartedly yearn for God’s kingdom to come; for His will to be done. The Apostle Paul is a champion for lifestyle worship when he instructs the early Christians to present their bodies as “living sacrifices, holy and acceptable unto God” (Romans 12:1-2). Lifestyle worship sees all of life as grateful expression of worship before God. “Whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17).

A second lens through which we observe biblical worship is that of **intentional acts of worship**, usually in the context of the corporate gathering. The Scriptures give instruction about what believers should do to worship God in the assembly. The Psalms are full of these descriptions and commands—singing, instruments, offerings, thanksgiving, praise, recounting God’s great deeds, confessing sin and pleading for mercy. We know that the early church met together in local congregations and devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42-47). We will explore this area further under the section “Choosing and Prioritizing Our Acts of Worship.”

A third perspective through which believers view biblical worship is that of **special closeness to God, inner worship**, or what many Praise & Worship proponents have labeled “Holy of Holies worship.” We can join the psalmist in expressing how our souls pant for the living God. We can know deep emotions of gratitude to God for his acts of faithfulness and deliverance. Every Christian remembers times in worship of being overwhelmed by a special sense of the reality of God’s love and the extravagance of his mercy and grace. There are many times when the Holy Spirit “sneaks up” on me and reinforces these things in my mind and heart through song and prayer and Scripture. Sometimes I am so moved, I cannot sing. Sometimes the tears bring a sense of deep cleansing. What a blessing! What a great God we serve!

But I want to suggest that this is an area for special caution in our music and worship ministries. We should not think of the emotional heights of praise as “varsity worship”; compared to the “junior varsity” actions that are fully faithful to biblical norms but yet may not take our breath away or yield tears of ecstasy. I suggest that we need to remember that the veil of the temple was torn; the perfect and final sacrifice was offered and accepted; and the “judge of all suffered death to set the captives free.” It was because of that mighty work of God that we know that all of our God-directed, Christ-centered, Spirit-led worship is accepted as “Holy of Holies” worship. Let us take care not to pervert the gospel to suggest that human emotion is somehow the key to authentic worship. The hymn writer said it well: “I dare not trust the sweetest frame [emotion], but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.”

Part II: Choosing and Prioritizing Our Acts of Worship

Realizing that there are several correct ways to use the word “worship,” I want to focus now on the challenge of arranging and prioritizing our acts of worship in the gathered assembly. I suggest that all the various components of Christian worship need to be fully rooted in Scripture and directed by the Holy Spirit’s work in the individual and in the church. God’s Spirit has granted individual believers different gifts and abilities, and the Lord has faithfully gathered us together in congregations with an even wider mix of spiritual giftedness. It is unrealistic to assume that every local congregation will offer its worship to God in exactly the same way.

As hard as we may look, there is not a definitive order of worship given to us in the Bible. There are, however, numerous commands and descriptions of God-honoring worship, as well as some pretty harsh warnings against the kind of worship the Lord despises. Where should we begin in putting together a list of proper service elements and, after coming up with a list, how shall we prioritize them?

We look first at several Scriptures that provide a starting place for our list of appropriate “service elements.”

Isaiah 6: Isaiah’s Vision

- A vision of God’s Glory (vv. 1-4)
- Awareness of sin and repentance (v. 5)
- A display of redemption (vs. 6-7)
- A commitment and commissioning for service (vs. 8-13)

Acts 2:42-47

- The apostles’ teaching
- Fellowship
- Prayer (or “the prayers”)
- Breaking of bread (fellowship and communion)
- Awe, signs and wonders
- Praising God
- Evangelism (the Lord added to their numbers)

Colossians 3:15-16

- The Word of God
- Thankfulness
- Teaching and admonishing
- Singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs
- Heart-felt gratitude

The Psalms (Many and varied elements. This list would go on for pages.)

- Shouts for joy & silent adoration
- Bringing offerings & bowing down
- Confessing sin & confessing faith
- Lament & Listening
- Remembering our failings & his faithfulness

This process could go on and on—ceremonies of initiation and remembrance (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper), public reading or the Word, reminders of redemption and pardon, training in righteousness, intercession for the needs of the body, affirmations of faith, and on and on and on.

Once our list of biblical service elements starts to take shape, leaders in the church must make some decisions about how to arrange them and how to give them appropriate weight. For purposes of this discussion, I invite you to consider the metaphor of a giant “worship” tent or pavilion. The structure is held up by many posts (individual service elements) and each post is firmly planted in the ground below (rooted in the Scriptures). The shape of the tent is determined by the choice of posts and their strategic arrangement. Some are taller, some are stronger, some are closer to the center of things, and some are important but hardly noticed. As the leaders of the church position and prioritize the service elements, a decision must be made—What will be at the center of the tent? What will be the focus of the worship pavilion?

Even though each congregation will represent a different mix of gifts (different posts), I suggest that the only appropriate center for our corporate worship is the GLORY OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS. Every element of the service—preaching, Scripture, singing, prayer—must be organized in such a way that the Glory of God in Christ (or through Christ) is heightened. Anything, even preaching or prayer, that takes center stage away from God’s glory has become an idol for us. Can we be honest enough to ask ourselves if there is one of our service elements (tent posts) that is stealing the show, that is begging for our attention or commanding our worship?

The biblical language about the glory of God in Christ is rich:

- John 1:14 “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”
- John 17:1 “Father, glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.”
- Philippians 2:9-11 “God highly exalted him . . . that Jesus Christ is Lord to the Glory of God the Father.”
- Hebrews 1:3 “[Christ] is the radiance of the glory of God.”
- Revelation 5:12 “Worthy is the lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.”

Friends, if our worship is not about Christ, we can't call it Christian worship. Let's take care to order our services in such a way as to exalt the Lord Jesus. Let's make sure that our prayers and sermons and song selections are saturated with the biblical truth of the gospel. And let's take care that we don't let anything—artistic excellence, oratorical perfection, aesthetic refinement, or human eloquence in prayer—usurp the central place of honor in our worship.

Is there something in worship that you can't live without (other than the glory of God in Christ)?

If there is, then agree with God that it is an idol. Confess it. Repent, be forgiven, and move on.

Part III: A Purpose Statement for Worship

In closing, let me see if I can say the same thing in another way. Prior to coming to the faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, I served as one of the pastors of the Chapel Hill Bible Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Over the years, the leadership of the church developed a purpose statement that reflects many of the worship priorities I have expressed already this morning.

Our purpose in the Christian church and in balanced biblical worship is to glorify God by responding to Jesus Christ through:

Exalting Him—as Savior and Lord, Creator and Redeemer.

Edifying the body—the teaching and preaching ministry. Reading the Word of God. Music can teach, too.

Exemplifying the values of the Kingdom of God—Christian unity, deference to the preferences and needs of others, sacrificial obedience, people over programs, ministry over money, Christ's kingdom over our kingdoms. This includes fellowship, nurture, prayer and social ministries.

Evangelizing His world—"You shall be my witnesses. Go into all the world." Start with our families. We have talked about lifestyle worship; we need to believe in and practice lifestyle evangelism as well.

Embracing our faith heritage—We did not invent the Christian faith in the last years of the 20th century. We are the grateful heirs of a rich biblical faith. In the universal church there is a real sense in which we are connected to the faithful confession of men and women who have gone before us.

Engaging the world—Will the world transform our worship, or will our worship of God make a difference in the way we see the world around us and engage the world for the sake of Christ? Can we see the lost through the eyes of the Savior? Are we willing to use a language that is fully understandable to the people around us? (Acts 17) Do the ministry of the church and our worship of God come as a blessing to our culture?

May God's richest blessings be yours; and may your worship leadership always serve to magnify the beauty of our glorious Savior.

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