CONTENTS

ARTICLES

BOOK REVIEWS

STR 17.1 (Spring 2026): 1–8

Introduction: Practicing Biblical Worship Today

Jonathan S. Welch
Guest Editor

Almost two decades ago, Michael Farley challenged evangelicals with a potent question in the title to his essay: "What Is 'Biblical' Worship?"[1] The question carries significance and relevance for at least two reasons. First, it acknowledges the importance of the Bible for Christian worship. As Farley declared, "Evangelical worship must be biblical worship."[2] For generations, Christians have looked to the Bible as God's Holy Word, as a living book, and as a guide for both individual and ecclesial life. While the Bible is essential for all Christian traditions, it holds a special place for evangelicals. After all, "biblicism" is one of the four hallmarks of evangelicalism delineated by David Bebbington in his seminal study.[3] For evangelicals, the Bible is the authoritative Word of God and described as inspired, infallible, and inerrant.[4]

But there is a second reason that Farley's question carries significance

[1] Michael A. Farley, "What Is 'Biblical' Worship? Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship," *JETS* 51.3 (2008): 591–613.

[2] Farley, "What Is 'Biblical' Worship?," 591.

[3] See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Routledge, 2005), 2. The four characteristics of what would become known as Bebbington's quadrilateral are conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism (pp. 2–3).

[4] The topic of worship according to Scripture is not new. Conversations about biblical worship have assumed different forms across different eras of church history. For some Christians, the topic of biblical worship evolved into what would become known as regulative and normative principles for worship. A contemporary inquiry into the regulative and normative debate could easily become its own theme for an academic journal. But the history is noteworthy, as the ideas represented here impact an understanding of biblical worship. These conversations focus on what God has or has not said in his Word. Proponents of the regulative perspective argue that God's Word "regulates"—or limits—how he is to be worshiped. The normative perspective counters that Christians are free to worship in any way or form, unless it is forbidden in Scripture. In either case, God's Word is central, reinforcing the value of understanding what the Bible has to say about worship.

and relevance. The question suggests that multiple understandings of biblical worship may exist and more precise definitions are warranted. To this point, Farley observed a pervasive aspiration for "biblical worship" in worship studies, but he astutely recognized inconsistencies in use. To put it simply, biblical worship might mean something different as one moves from author to author, study to study, or context to context. Thus, Farley offered a taxonomy of at least three possible interpretations for "biblical worship" in academic literature.[5] One group considers biblical worship to be found in NT imperatives. A second group sees biblical worship as the worship of the early church. The third group treats biblical worship as theological principles for worship with continuity between OT and NT Scriptures. The abundance of perspectives on biblical worship serves to illustrate the value of the concept. Worship is to be taken seriously, and Christians in every context must wrestle with what God's Word says about worship.

Herein lies the value of conversations regarding biblical worship. Readers of God's Word can quickly discern that some human actions thrill God's heart, whereas other human behaviors are sinful, with some even evoking God's immediate judgment and wrath (Lev 10:1–3; 1 Cor 11:27–32). Though evangelical zeal for biblical worship is not without critique, the issue is serious—as the topic of biblical worship generates a host of reflections and statements about both God and humanity. As a result, recent decades have witnessed the emergence of a number of works that describe what biblical worship is and is not. Yet, many such studies operate from biblical-theological methods and propose general principles for honoring God in public Christian worship. What is lacking is more critical reflection on the application of biblical worship in the practices of public Christian worship.

The rationale here should be easy to follow. Worship requires contextualization. Since every context is diverse, it is common to offer general theological reflections and entrust practical applications to Christians, churches, and church leaders. But perhaps either too much is being asked of church leaders, or too much is being assumed in the practices of worship ministry. Particularly in the Free Church tradition, more conversation is needed to properly consider the application of biblical worship in worship ministry today. This subject is precisely what this issue of *Southeastern Theological Review* seeks to remedy. If Farley and other scholars strive to address what biblical worship is, the essays in this academic journal endeavor to answer related questions: What should Christians do when they gather together for worship? How does a biblical theology of worship

[5] Farley, "What Is 'Biblical' Worship?," 591–613.

relate to worship ministry today?

Elements of Biblical Worship

Indeed, more discourse is needed to appropriately discern how to conduct worship ministry according to Scripture. How are Christians to enact biblical worship in gatherings today? Those concerned with biblical worship might be tempted to scour the Scriptures in search for answers at a structural level, perhaps through biblical orders of worship. There is little doubt that some structure or order can be discerned in various biblical passages, such as Exod 24:1–11; Isa 6:1–8; Acts 2:42–47; or even Heb 2:12. Though some have developed "biblical" orders of worship from consideration of such passages, the reality is that no scholarly consensus exists regarding a prescriptive order of worship from the Scriptures.

But the Scriptures are by no means silent regarding what to do in corporate Christian worship. Instead of a unilateral order or liturgy, God's Word specifies that God's people should enact certain liturgical practices in worship gatherings. Some traditions classify these liturgical actions of worship, typically practices with biblical foundations and historic precedent, as "elements" of gathered worship. Like discourse surrounding a prescriptive order of worship, no clear scholarly consensus emerges concerning the elements of worship, and the limitations of this journal prevent a full taxonomy of possible elements suggested by various studies of Christian worship.

Nevertheless, each iteration of elements for Christian worship can be considered a liturgical model. As such, liturgical models abound, particularly in recent Protestant literature. A number of scholars contend for a historic fourfold order of Gathering, Word, Table (or Alternative Response), and Sending—with popular adherents including Methodist minister Constance Cherry and Anglican priest W. David O. Taylor.[6] Presbyterian pastor Bryan Chapell synthesizes various historic liturgies to arrive at eight elements for gathered Christian worship: Adoration, Confession, Assurance, Thanksgiving, Petition and Intercession, Instruction, Communion / Fellowship, and Charge and Blessing.[7] Though the order of elements is significant for the aforementioned liturgical models, not all liturgical models ascribe to a rigid order. Thus, many practical guides for

[6] See Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2021), 58–140; W. David O. Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation: Worship and the Formative Power of the Arts* (Eerdmans, 2019), 32–33.

[7] Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Baker Academic, 2009), 148–49.

worship ministry include similar lists of biblical evidence for specific liturgical practices—with or without a recommended sequence.

This journal issue promotes one specific liturgical model with particular relevance to the practice of biblical worship ministry today. The model is typically not recognized by its title(s), but by the five biblical elements that it represents: read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and "see" the Bible—through the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Each of these liturgical practices is supported by biblical evidence. Though some have labeled this approach "traditional evangelical worship,"[8] a more appropriate title might be the Westminster or Reformed model, due to its historic foundations.

The Westminster Assembly convened in the mid-seventeenth century to discuss reforms to the church, according to Scripture. One result of this session was the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646–1647), which includes multiple paragraphs to guide the worship of the church. Chapter Twenty-One ("Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day") includes five paragraphs. After a theological preamble explaining that God must be worshiped according to his Word, instruction is provided for five specific liturgical practices: prayer, reading the Scriptures, preaching, singing, and "the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ."[9] This document would undoubtedly influence additional confessions of faith. Within a few decades, the Second London Baptist Confession (1689) would espouse a similar description of public Christian worship, also delineating the same five elements in Chapter Twenty-Two, Paragraphs Three through Five.[10] Thus, Baptists might prefer to claim this liturgical model as the Second London model. The suggested label of a Westminster model is merely a nod to the historical antecedent.

These five elements receive regular attention in worship studies into the present day. One noteworthy example is the work of Presbyterian pastor and scholar Robert Rayburn, who comments on these five liturgical practices regularly, but unsystematically, in his treatise on evangelical worship.[11] It is unclear when exactly the five liturgical elements receive modifications to become read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible,

[8] J. Ligon Duncan III, "Traditional Evangelical Worship," in *Perspectives on Christian Worship: Five Views*, ed. J. Matthew Pinson (B&H Academic, 2009), 105.

[9] The Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.5. The order listed here is not a prescribed sequence, but merely the order in which the elements are introduced in the document.

[10] As with the Westminster Confession, the Second London Baptist Confession does not prescribe a rigid order for the five elements.

[11] Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (Wipf and Stock, 1980).

sing the Bible, and see the Bible. However, one author who can be credited with early and consistent use of the phrasing is Presbyterian pastor and scholar J. Ligon Duncan III.[12] Having now completed a sufficient orientation to the model itself, attention will now be given to the distinct emphasis the model places on incorporating the Bible in every element of corporate worship.

Biblical Worship Today

Although it is recommended that Christians—at the very least—utilize these five elements in gathered worship, the concerns of this journal issue run much deeper. Accomplishing the tasks of praying, singing, reading, preaching, and executing the ordinances are not enough in and of themselves. The central focus of this journal is to reimagine what it looks like to perform these elements *according to Scripture*. At its very core, biblical worship communicates a type of worship that is to be exercised and performed according to the content of the Bible as the Word of God. This immediately implies that some of the actions and expressions of worship—however earnest they may be—may not be connected to the Bible. It is also possible to perform each element in a way that does not communicate the message of the Bible.

Evangelicals have long understood that Christians gather to worship God by giving him praise. Yet, as liturgical studies scholar James F. White explains, "Both the glorification of God and the sanctification of humans characterize Christian worship. Apparent tensions between them are superficial."[13] There is a formative dimension to Christian worship that many Protestants, particularly evangelicals, are just beginning to recover. Philosopher James K. A. Smith corroborates the perspective espoused by White, as he notes, "The wisdom of historic Christian worship … sees worship not only as expressive (what we offer to God) but also as *formative* (what God is doing *to us* in the encounter)."[14] Protestant reconsiderations of formation in worship are indeed a positive step.

However, evangelicals must recognize and remember the source of formative power in Christian worship—the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the gospel that is considered "the power of God" because it reveals God

[12] See, e.g., J. Ligon Duncan III, "Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2003), 65.

[13] James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3rd ed. (Abingdon, 2000), 24.

[14] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Baker: 2013), 182 (emphasis original).

(Rom 1:16–17). The gospel is the fuel for Christian worship. Many church leaders advocate for gospel-centered and gospel-shaped gatherings. But let the church also appreciate the layers of formative liturgical power emanating from the gospel when it is infused in every nook and cranny of the liturgy. Therein lies a chief aim of this issue—an evangelical *ressourcement* that seeks to return to the Scriptures as a way to prune liturgical malpractice and unearth any dormant dynamism in congregational Christian worship.[15]

Each essay in this issue targets a selected element of Christian worship and argues for a reimagined perspective of the liturgical practice according to Scripture. For each element, the author considers how a return to the Scriptures might reinvigorate—or even reimagine—the church's worship today. In doing so, each essay is united by a common goal to realize the Scriptures and display (or even "preach") the gospel of Jesus *through* each liturgical action. The essays proceed in the following order, though it must be noted that the sequence here is not intended to advocate for a particular liturgical sequence: praying the Bible, singing the Bible, reading the Bible, preaching the Bible, and seeing the Bible.[16]

In "Prayer as Participation," Chessa Williams, Assistant Professor of Worship Arts and Ministry at California Baptist University (Riverside, CA), begins by recognizing existing studies that sufficiently consider biblical content and Bible-based patterns for prayer. Williams then charts a different course, where she considers the relative decline of prayer in evangelical worship. For Williams, the issue is not a lack of Bible knowledge or time; it is ontological. Prayer is more than merely one of many liturgical activities. Prayer is "the ontological ground of worship itself, where Christians are immersed in a biblical reality that is primarily covenantal and immanently relational" (p. 55). The essay proceeds to reimagine all of corporate worship as one "immersive act of prayer" that forms worshipers through ongoing discourse with the triune God.

When broaching the topic of singing the Bible, it can be tempting to

[15] The latter issue in this sentence may benefit from additional exposition. Dormant dynamism refers to the idea that some congregations simply may not recognize or realize the formative power of certain liturgical elements. In other words, for some congregations today, the dynamic power of the gospel may be unintentionally obscured or unknowingly muted in various aspects of Christian worship.

[16] Though Ducan regularly describes the Westminster liturgical model in a consistent sequence, his order is not necessarily prescriptive. Churches can exercise freedom when discerning how to best appropriate these five elements into their respective contexts. Similarly, the concerns of this journal are not tied to a single ordering of liturgical elements.

allow the lyrical content of songs to become the dominant issue in this liturgical practice. After all, many evangelicals today seem increasingly attuned to the importance of singing biblically sound and theologically deep lyrics in congregational worship. Although evangelicals should appraise the lyrics of songs sung in worship, my essay on "Ten Biblical Functions of Congregational Singing" diverts ecclesial attention instead to the theological mechanics of song. As Assistant Professor of Christian Worship at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Judson College (Wake Forest, NC), I argue that to sing the Bible requires an awareness and application of specific functions that congregational song facilitates for the church, as demonstrated in Ezra 3:10–13 and additional Scriptures. Recovering this language of functions for song is essential to subvert the reductionistic views of congregational singing that persist in some congregations today.

Andrew Lucius, Assistant Professor of Music and Worship Leadership at Charleston Southern University (Charleston, SC), undertakes the practice of reading the Bible in "A Gathered People of the Book." Lucius observes an unfortunate irony in some evangelical contexts—congregations that uphold the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible as the Word of God are sometimes timid to read large portions of Scripture out loud in gathered worship. To promote the public reading of Scripture in worship, Lucius exegetes key passages of Scripture (Deut 31:9–13; Neh 8:1–8; Isa 55:10–11; Luke 4:16–21; Acts 13:14–15) and presents a limited historical survey (*The Apostolic Tradition* and Justin's *First Apology*), before providing practical considerations to promote the public reading of Scripture today.

Zac Hicks, Adjunct Lecturer in Ecclesiology and Worship at Samford University (Birmingham, AL), approaches the topic of "Preach the Bible" by considering first how Jesus himself preached the Bible (Luke 24:27, 32). Hicks argues, provocatively, that restating the message of any particular Bible passage is not necessarily preaching the Bible. Instead, as Hicks contends, preaching the Bible requires preaching Christ from the Scriptures as a speech-act of gospel proclamation in worship. Hicks draws on sources from the Jewish origins of preaching, NT material, and theological resources from the Reformation period in support, before supplying suggestions for sermon preparation and delivery today.

Next, the practice of seeing the Bible is appropriately divided between two essays, one for each ordinance of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Regarding baptism, Matthew Westerholm, Professor of Church Music and Worship at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Louisville, KY), laments that many evangelicals miss the value of baptism as an act of corporate worship. In "Baptism: Doxology & (Aquatic) Theology,"

Westerholm advocates for baptism as an indispensable element of worship. He appropriates a description of baptism from the *Baptist Faith and Message* to highlight four underappreciated aspects of baptism. With each component, Westerholm investigates biblical foundations and offers a compelling exposition that enhances the meaning of baptism for the church and encourages more regular inclusion of baptism in evangelical worship gatherings today.

Lastly, Joshua Waggener, Professor of Church Music and Worship at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Fort Worth, TX), calls for a reconsideration of biblical and Baptist emphases on the Lord's Supper in "Rich Remembrance, Faithful Witness, and Manifest Unity." In this essay, he identifies a myriad of recent issues that complicate the liturgical practice of the Eucharist and potentially obfuscate the meaning of the ordinance. For Waggener, the solution for the church today lies in a return to Paul's instructions for the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11:17–34 and a recovery of Baptist theological emphases, as seen in both historic Baptist confessions and contemporary theological studies.

Taken together, the essays in this journal issue offer a reimagined perspective on biblical worship for Christian congregations today. Readers will be challenged to rethink what it looks like to worship God corporately, according to Scripture. But this journal issue is not meant to be an exhaustive or comprehensive treatment of each liturgical practice. Instead, this issue seeks to ignite fresh conversations about Christian worship in evangelical spaces, hopefully encouraging Christians to return to their Bibles and thereby rediscover additional applications and emphases for their own unique contexts—all to the glory and praise of the triune God.