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Prayer as Participation: The Dialogical Nature of Biblical Worship

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Abstract: *This article argues that corporate worship is structured by covenantal dialogue grounded in participation in the triune life of God. Drawing on biblical and liturgical theology, it contends that prayer is not merely one element within worship but its foundational grammar. As God addresses his people through his Word, the church responds in prayer through spoken and sung forms shaped by Scripture. This rhythm of divine address and human response forms the church's imagination, shaping believers to understand worship as immersion in God's relational presence rather than as a sequence of discrete practices. Recovering prayer as the dialogical structure of worship clarifies its theological coherence and highlights its formative role in shaping the church's participation in the triune life of God.*

Key Words: *biblical worship, covenantal dialogue, formation, liturgical imagination, participation, prayer, relational presence, Trinitarian worship, worship ontology*

Prayer in worship is often discussed in terms of biblical prescriptions, so readers may reasonably expect an account of how to pray, or which prayers ought to be included in a service. However, there are already numerous excellent resources devoted to praying according to Scripture's content and patterns, including works by D. A. Carson, R. C. Sproul, and J. Gary Millar.[1] Rather than reiterating the contents of these works, this article approaches prayer from a different angle. Its concern is not primarily with principles of prayer derived from Scripture, but with prayer as the grammar of gathered worship itself, the form through which worship becomes conscious participation in God's presence. This emphasis

[1] Notable resources include D. A. Carson, *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2015); R. C. Sproul, *The Prayer of the Lord* (Reformation Trust, 2009); J. Gary Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*, NSBT 38, ed. D. A. Carson (IVP Academic, 2016); and Graeme Goldsworthy's *Prayer and the Knowledge of God: What the Whole Bible Teaches* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2004). For an excellent resource on the application and devotional discipline of prayer, see Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World*, 2nd ed. (NavPress, 2017).

diminishes neither the role of preaching nor teaching in worship but argues that the Word of God is most faithfully received when worship is structured by the dialogical logic of prayer which holds together God's address and the church's response. The focus here is, therefore, on corporate worship within contemporary evangelical contexts where prayer has often been functionally marginal rather than structurally formative.

In evangelical worship that draws from the mores of Contemporary Worship Music, prayer is often reduced to a utilitarian function, filling the time needed for musicians to transition on or off the stage, bridging otherwise disconnected elements such as announcements and singing, or smoothing over the space needed for a key change. In this context, prayer is often perceived as the thing that happens between worship elements. Although there is certainly no wrong time to pray, an examination of these typical uses of prayer reveals a significant reduction of the role of prayer in worship: Prayer becomes a pragmatic filler in service of an aesthetic ideal of "flow." This functionalization of prayer is not a moral failure, but an imaginative one—a failure to grasp Scripture's vision of the role of prayer in Christian worship.

Although many have noted the diminishing role of prayer in evangelical worship,[2] conversations about prayer too often remain at the procedural level—how to pray, when to pray, or what words to use—rather

[2] Gary Millar begins his biblical theology of prayer with the claim that "The church in many places has stopped praying" (*Calling on the Name of the Lord*, 15). According to Allen P. Ross, "One of the most neglected aspects of corporate worship (and no doubt the spiritual life in general) is prayer" (*Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* [Kregel Academic, 2006], 447). Constance Cherry observes, "In many churches today, praying in worship is in decline. In some churches it has all but disappeared. Unfortunately, this is more likely to be true for services in the contemporary style, which tend to be devoted almost entirely to an extended time of singing followed by a lengthy time of preaching or teaching. As the minutes given to singing and preaching swell (in any style), other features are squeezed out, most notably prayer and Scripture reading" (*The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*, 2nd ed. [Baker Academic, 2021], 144). It is worth noting in this claim that Cherry is clearly distinguishing spoken prayer and not sung prayer in contemporary styles of worship. The extended period of singing to which she refers is, undoubtedly, mostly prayer. Nonetheless, Stanley Grenz echoes a similar concern, "If we look closely at the contemporary situation we would likely find ourselves readily admitting that ours is the epitome of a prayerless church" (*Prayer: The Cry for the Kingdom,* rev. ed. [Eerdmans, 2005], 3–4). Further, Grenz notes that "not only does prayer find little place in the structure of church life, but meager attention is devoted to fostering a praying congregation" (p. 4).

than addressing the deeper question of why its significance has diminished. The decline of prayer is not due to inadequate biblical knowledge or limited time in the gathering; it reflects, more profoundly, an ontological problem. If worship is not grasped as a relational communion with the God who speaks and listens, then prayer will inevitably be displaced by practices that feel more efficient or have a greater affective return on investment.

Where evangelical practice often treats prayer as a way to cover the liturgical seams, Scripture presents prayer as both rooted in and constitutive of the covenantal relationship between God and the worshiper. In fact, prayer functions in worship as the central act of participation in the divine-human relationship, grounding the worshiper in God's reality, lifting their gaze from themselves to seeking the face of God. This is a reality in which God speaks and listens, and his people respond as covenant creatures. Therefore, *prayer is not just a discrete act within worship but the ontological ground of worship itself, where Christians are immersed in a biblical reality that is primarily covenantal and immanently relational.*

To support this claim, I proceed in four movements. First, I examine the grammar of Christian worship, showing that its fundamental structure is dialogical: God speaks and his people answer, and this dialogical pattern shapes a functional ontology in which worshipers learn to inhabit God's reality. Second, I demonstrate that prayer uniquely participates in the ontology of the triune life: the Spirit praying within us, the Son mediating our address, and the Father receiving it. This trinitarian dynamic is not an abstract doctrine but the logic that grounds why worship must take the form of prayer. Third, I argue that corporate worship should therefore be understood as an immersive act of prayer, the primary setting in which believers are formed through continual divine-human dialogue. Finally, I draw out implications for contemporary practice, suggesting how churches might sustain this dialogical rhythm so that worshipers are trained to live *coram Deo* in all of life.

Defining Prayer

Prayer is, as Gary Millar defines, "calling on the name of the Lord."[3] He carefully distinguishes this from mere dialogue with God, noting that Adam and Eve's conversations with God in their prelapsarian state are classified as ordinary speech, not prayer. Millar concludes that prayer as covenantal invocation is particular to a fallen world. Central to his project is the claim that "calling on the name of Yahweh" is "prayer that asks God to deliver on his covenantal promises," which the NT rearticulates

[3] Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord*, 17.

as "praying in the name of Jesus."[4] The phrase *praying in the name of Jesus*, however, carries a range of meaning in Scripture. In some contexts, it refers broadly to the worshipful response of God's covenant people to his self-revelation (Gen 4:26; 12:8; 13:3–4; 26:25; Ps 116:17; Zeph 3:9). In other instances, it clearly denotes the direct act of addressing God in petition, praise, or lament (2 Sam 22:4; Ps 18:6; 116:4; Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13). This range is not a contradiction, but reveals something essential about prayer itself. Prayer does not stand apart from worship, but gives explicit voice to the covenantal response that defines all true worship. For this article, therefore, I adopt Millar's covenantal framework and define prayer as covenantal dialogue with God: the conscious act of addressing God in response to his self-revelation within the covenant established through Christ.

Worship is also essentially dialogue. Worship is the Christian's covenantal, Holy-Spirit-enabled response to God's self-revelation. God speaks; humans respond. If both worship more broadly and prayer more specifically enact this covenantal dialogue, what meaningfully distinguishes one from the other? To clarify, prayer is worship, but not all worship is prayer. Worship encompasses any aspect of human life lived in acknowledgement of and dedication to God; it is a category of innumerable actions, not one particular act.[5] This means that not every instance of genuine Christian worship is immediately recognizable as worship because worship does not require a specific, semantic declaration. For example, if an unbeliever changes a child's diaper, that act is not worship. Yet a believer performing the same act, acknowledging God as the child's Creator and offering that care for the building of God's kingdom through the child's nurture, can indeed be worship, whether it is verbalized or not. Prayer, however, occupies a unique role within worship because it gives explicit voice to the covenantal response that defines all worship.[6] In this

[4] Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord*, 18.

[5] John R. W. Stott illustrates the meaning of this generic category of worship that takes innumerable shapes in the Christan life: "When we present our bodies to God, our feet will walk in his paths, our lips will speak the truth and spread the gospel, our tongues will bring healing, our hands will lift up those who have fallen, and perform many mundane tasks as well like cooking and cleaning, typing and mending; our arms will embrace the lonely and the unloved, our ears will listen to the cries of the distressed, and our eyes will look humbly and patiently towards God" (*The Message of the Romans: God's Good News for the World,* BST [InterVarsity Press, 1994], 322).

[6] For the purposes of this essay, I am speaking of liturgical prayer. Certainly, there are unspoken prayers that elude linguistic capture. Scripture even gives us the category of the Spirit's prayers that are even too deep for words (Rom 8:26).

way, prayer gives voice to the relational reality at the heart of Christian worship, making explicit the response that defines all true worship.

It is important to note that prayer in corporate worship may be spoken or sung. In fact, most Christian worship songs are sung prayers, giving voice to the worshiper's direct address to God in praise, petition, confession, or thanksgiving.[7] Scripture itself presents singing as a covenantal response to the prior address of God's Word, exhorting believers to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly … singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16).[8] Here, singing emerges not as an independent act but as the response through which the indwelling Word takes root within the gathered community. Calvin likewise understood singing as a form of prayer, noting its power to move believers to invoke and praise God with greater fervor. Singing, therefore, is not merely expressive, but a way that the church corporately responds to and addresses God in prayer. It constitutes a musical enactment of covenantal dialogue, in which the worshiper consciously responds to God's self-revelation through voiced address.

What Makes Prayer in Worship "Biblical"?

When "biblical" modifies "worship" or "prayer," it is often reduced to questions of procedure, whether the practice follows Scripture's prescriptions and principles. But to equate "biblical" with rule-keeping alone mistakes superstition for faithfulness, treating prayer as if the right words or forms could guarantee divine response. Scripture does not merely dictate patterns; it narrates a world, reorienting how we see ourselves and creation under the lordship of Christ. Thus, for prayer to be truly biblical, it must both follow the Bible's rules and immerse us in its realm—the reality in which God creates, sustains, and makes himself relationally present to his people.

Scripture gives prayer both its shape and its meaning: in prayer, worshipers step into God's reality and align themselves with his will rather

[7] All of worship can and should be offered in dialogue with God, mediated through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Still, Scripture also calls us to participation in prayer as discreet acts of attentive conversation with God (Matt 5:44; 6:5–13; Eph 6:18; Phil 4:6; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:17; 1 Tim 2:1; Jas 5:13). John Calvin assumes this category of sung prayer in his *Institutes* 3.20.31 when he writes that "it is perfectly clear that neither words nor singing (if used in prayer) are of the least consequence, or avail one iota with God, unless they proceed from deep feeling in the heart" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion,* trans. Henry Beveridge [Hendrickson, 2008], 590).

[8] All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

than merely observing it. This is why prayer lies at the heart of Christian worship. This is why prayer is of such importance in Christian worship. When we emphasize only the rules, we miss the realm; prayer becomes a matter of correct wording or timing rather than an immersion in God's presence. Biblical prayer grants a biblical apprehension of reality by moving worshipers from mere spectators to true participants, engaging them directly with God in the give-and-receive of divine-human communion. In this way, prayer inducts worshipers into a lived biblical ontology, shaping not only how they see God's world but how they inhabit it in covenantal communion with him.

Prayer is the movement by which worshipers are drawn from rules into realm, and its significance therefore cannot be separated from the grammar that orders this encounter with God. The language of worship does more than transmit meaning; it forms the imagination of the worshiper, shaping how God's presence is perceived and how participation in his reality is enacted. To pray the Bible, then, is not merely to recite its words, but to enter its dialogical world, addressing God according to the reality Scripture reveals and thereby participating in the covenantal communion it discloses.

The Grammar of Christian Worship

Corporate worship is both dialogical and didactic. It is the primary location of teaching and edification for the believer and, at the same time, the setting for dialogue between God and his gathered people. Didactic worship takes place in the third person, as when believers teach or proclaim truths about God to others ("The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer," Ps 18:2). Dialogical worship, by contrast, takes place in the second person as when worshipers address God directly in prayer ("There is none like you among the gods, O Lord," Ps 86:8). These two grammars are not interchangeable, each creates a distinct posture of engagement in worship. To understand the profundity of prayer in Christian worship, worshipers must understand why direct, second-person address to God is essential. Prayer is central to Christian worship, not only because Scripture commands and models it, but because it functions as the grammar of worship, structuring the worshiper's engagement, forming their perception of reality, and shaping their imagination of what is truly happening in the gathering. Prayer, then, rests on two grammatical presuppositions—presence and relationship—that together shape the meaning of addressing God in the second person.

Dialogical Worship

Prayer is the act of direct address through which Christians encounter

God in corporate worship. Prayer moves worshipers from passive observation about God to active participation with God, orienting them to reality itself: Christ as present Lord and the worshiper as dependent. In this way, prayer establishes the ontological foundation of worship by drawing worshipers into divine reality, transforming them from spectators to participants actively immersed in God's presence through dialogue.[9] Without such direct engagement, worshippers risk being shaped into imagining that God is not truly present, for why would we ignore someone who is in the room?

First, the "I-you" grammar of prayer presupposes a relationship. The very ability to address God as "you" is the most profound privilege of the Christian life because it indicates covenantal union. If the Christian can address God in the second person, then they are already in Christ. Jesus explains that "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt 11:27). Paul echoes this Christological exclusivity, "these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:10–11). Only by union with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit can someone know God personally and address him directly as "you." Therefore, the second-person grammar of prayer itself projects a rich picture of a trinitarian reality. If the Christian's reality is determined by relationship to Christ, then worship must be relational and dialogical at its center in order to faithfully reflect that reality.[10]

[9] As Simon Chan observes, the liturgy is not merely expressive but constitutive, arising as the church's common response to God's prior address and thereby forming the gathered community as the covenant people: "The first step toward establishing a sound theology of worship is to discover the connection between worship and the church…. The church was chosen in Christ before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4), but in its actualization, the church is the people called out by God's word to be the congregation of God's people. What we call the liturgy is the people's *common* response to that word, their acceptance of the Word, which constitutes them as the covenant people" (*Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* [IVP Academic, 2006], 41, emphasis original).

[10] Chan argues, "True worship must reflect the reality of who God is. That is, whatever the liturgical forms may be, they must conform to certain theological norms. But for many advocates of 'contemporary worship' this fact is often obscured by attempts at ad hoc constructions of 'orders' of worship that pay more attention to what the congregations demands than to what God requires" (*Liturgical Theology*, 57–58).

Second, the grammar of prayer presupposes proximity. We address one another directly only when we know we can be heard. The second person implies God's nearness, his real, immediate, and accessible presence to his people. Prayer, therefore, expresses both relationship and confidence in God's presence, shaping the worshiper's sense of being-in-relation to God. Through this direct engagement, Christians participate in the reality of their union with Christ and are formed in their identity as those who live *coram deo*.

Didactic Worship

The Christian worship gathering is also didactic, useful for instruction and edification through teaching, preaching, exhortation, admonition, and proclamation. Paul makes this clear when he instructs leaders "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Eph 4:12–14). All of this, he urges, must be done for building up the body in love (Eph 4:16).

It is worth considering what conception of reality is implied when the worship gathering is structured predominantly by didactic engagement. If the privileged mode of engaging with God in the gathering is indirect, worshipers may come to assume that he is not really present, and that worship is merely a classroom, not an encounter. The renewed seriousness around theology in worship, particularly evident in the biblical worship movement, has been a genuine gift, re-centering many gatherings around doctrinal depth. Yet in some contexts, this emphasis has privileged teaching to the extent that God is encountered primarily in the third person, therefore displacing relational communion as the center of the gathering.

When didacticism becomes the privileged language of worship, it risks diminishing prayer.[11] An overemphasis on instruction can lead worship away from prayer precisely because prayer does not function as direct teaching. As D. A. Carson observes, "Something has gone wrong in our reasoning if our reasoning leads us away from prayer; something is amiss

[11] I am speaking to broadly English-speaking reformed churches, those that would fall in the "biblical worship" movement. There are certainly many churches immersed in Contemporary Worship Music that underemphasize teaching. Some traditions overemphasize didacticism, others overemphasize affective flow; both can collapse prayer.

in our theology if our theology becomes a disincentive to pray."[12] The same can be said of ontology: if the worshiper's operative vision of reality, formed primarily through didactic engagement, does not make space for divine presence and dialogue, it will likewise disincentivize prayer. A worshiper's ontology must see the reality of Christ as present and active, the very ground of their worship.

Far from distracting from divine encounter, the didactic dimension of worship ought to deepen it, for God's Word signifies his real presence and invites the church into responsive dialogue with the living Christ. In no way do I mean to suggest that teaching ought to decrease or diminish, but that the task of teaching itself and the necessary employment of didactic language be done consciously within and for the service of the dialogical and the relational. Therefore, teaching in worship must be done *coram deo* before the face of the living Lord who both speaks and listens. For the didactic to be held within the dialogical, John Macquarrie says that "the subject matter of Christian theology, God in Christ, is not a passive object laid out for our scrutiny … but the transcendent reality which already encompasses us."[13] The task of the didactic is to help the mind submit to the reality that Christ has established, a way of helping the worshiper consciously participate in the reality of Christ's presence. Without the didactic, the dialectic risks devolution to mere mysticism. Yet, without a dialogical ontology, the didactic becomes merely a detached inquiry rather than a participation in the reality of God who reveals himself.

John Webster warns that to teach without an ontology of relational authority is to introduce a distinctly secular "anthropology of enquiry" which encourages distance from the object it considers. "The effect of this anthropology," Webster concludes, "is to isolate and then privilege an ideal of rational competence" marked by a detached ascent rather than a transformation in the presence of God. Webster argues that "the object of theology is nothing less than the eschatological self-presence of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Theology is oriented to this active presence, and its enquiries are both materially and formally determined, borne along and corrected by that presence."[14] Christ is not merely the object of belief that the pastor teaches about, but the one whose relational presence is the very ground of belief. This is what it means for the didactic explication of God's Word to be done in *coram deo*. Prayer is not merely a liturgical bookend to instruction but its ontological condition.

[12] Carson, *Praying with Paul*, 125.

[13] John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality* (SCM, 1972), 70.

[14] John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II*, Cornerstones (T&T Clark, 2005), 26.

The challenge of conceiving prayer as the metagrammar of Christian worship, shaping the entire structure of the gathering, is that it reshapes traditional hierarchies of worship centered around a singular teacher who functions as a "sage on a stage." Preaching of the Word is not the means by which man rules as one with unique power, but, as Calvin says, is the means by which Christ rules in his church.[15] God's Word rules God's Church, and church leaders have the joy to exposit this word, not for the sake of establishing their own glory, but bringing hearers under the Lordship of Christ. Leadership in teaching and exhortation remains vital, yet prayer places leaders and congregation together within the same ecclesial "we" addressing God as "you." When a pastor prays, they do so not as one set apart from the congregation but as one who seeks alongside them. In this sense, prayer relativizes hierarchy, reminding both leaders and people that all stand as creatures before the Creator. Prayer is a radically democratizing act. Yet far from undermining leadership, this shared posture reorients it, situating authority within the mutual dependence of the body on God. So, these two distinct grammars for Christian worship create different ways of understanding the role of the gathering: Is it for all Christians to seek the Lord together as a congregation? Or to primarily be instructed about God by an expert? Naturally, the answer is both, but I have tried to demonstrate the tension.

Accomplishing this kind of ontological reorientation is difficult if prayer is treated only as a discrete act in worship, engaged occasionally rather than constitutively. God's relational presence pervades all of worship, but prayer draws the church into that presence with particular clarity,

[15] Highlighting the necessity of Christ's Lordship through his Word preached, Calvin asks: "In short, since the church is the kingdom of Christ, and he reigns only by his word, can there be any doubt as to the falsehood of those statements by which the kingdom of Christ is represented without his scepter. In other words, without his sacred word?" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 694 [4.2.4]). Perhaps in an echo of Peter's pastoral advice on the character of an under shepherd, that their ministry be done "not domineering over those in your charge" (1 Pet 5:3), Calvin explicates the nature of pastoral authority through teaching: "We are now to speak of the order in which the Lord has been pleased that his church should be governed. For though it is right that he alone should rule and reign in the church, that he should preside and be conspicuous in it and that it's government should be exercised and administered solely by his word; yet as he does not dwell among us in visible presence, so as to declare his will to us by his own lips, he in this (as we have said) uses the ministry of men, by making them, as it were, his substitutes, not by transferring his right and honor to them, but only doing his work by their lips, just as an artificer uses a tool for any purpose" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 700 [4.3.1]).

bringing us into conscious awareness of Christ's nearness through the relational intimacy of divine-human dialogue. Worshipers cannot step in and out of God's reality as if it were liturgically episodic; prayer reforms the Christian imagination only through sustained immersion. Prayer, then, is not a narrow act that begins and ends but a rhythm that carries the whole service. Within this rhythm, didactic elements retain their theological weight precisely as they are carried along by dialogue with God, reminding the church that the God spoken about is also the God addressed.

Prayer as Participation in God

Thus far, I have distinguished between the two grammars of Christian worship to highlight the unique role of prayer as the most immediate and natural expression of being in God's presence. Yet prayer is not only an expression that builds a relational awareness of God's immediate presence, but is itself the divine-human dialogue through which worshipers participate in God's presence and in the life of the triune God. Prayer draws worshipers beyond mere spectatorship, inviting a reorientation away from the claims of a fallen world and toward their identity in the divine life. In prayer, Christians are apprenticed into participation in the trinitarian reality itself, learning to live a life shaped by communion with Father, Son, and Spirit. To understand why prayer must become the primary *ordo* of worship, we must first understand what Christian prayer actually is: participation in the trinitarian life of God.

Prayer as Participation in God the Father

The Lord's Prayer does more than teach the rules of prayer; it draws worshipers into the realm of divine life, shaping prayer as an act of real participation in God. The opening address, "Our Father, who art in heaven," grounds prayer in the foundational relationship that animates the Christian life. God is known, truly, only as Father,[16] and as Allen Ross notes, "The title 'Father' is covenant language."[17] Prayer begins in the reality that believers participate in God's family, adopting the filial posture Christ himself assumes.

The Lord's Prayer also invites worshipers to participate in God's will, the decisive structure of reality, through prayer. God's will is at the center of divine life, and certainly the worshiper already participated in God's will as the recipient of God's effectual calling, but as David Lemley notes,

[16] Prayer is predicated on God's covenant initiative, thus in terms of biblical theology, "prayer is made possible only by 'the gospel.' All prayer is *gospel prayer*. It is calling on the name of Yahweh, who is the God of the covenant, the God of salvation" (Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord,* 43, emphasis original).

[17] Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Kregel Academic, 2006), 450.

"In this prayer, the petitioner or community was asked to participate in the lived will of God."[18] The will of God determines reality since it is everything he wants and allows to happen. This kind of prayer that Jesus models, praying for God's will to be done, is how Christians participate in God through prayer, by being a part of the reality that comes to be through the decree of God.[19] As Paul Bunyan explains, "Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God hath promised, or, according to the Word, for the good of the Church, with submission, in Faith, to the Will of God."[20] Prayer offered according to Christ's example is a participation in God's by participating in his will in terms of what does and does not come to pass in the world.

When Christ is asking us to pray in this way, to follow this model of prayer, it is less of a call to imitate than a call to participate.[21] One cannot imitate the Lord's prayer without being joined to him. Jesus's archetypal prayer is addressed "Our Father," a reality that can only be true of other people offering prayers if they are first joined to Christ and adopted. To be a son of God, one must participate in God through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:14–17). We cannot merely imitate Christ's prayer and divine communion; we have to participate in it. Christ's prayer is not merely a pattern but a call to participate in his own filial communion with the Father. Prayer, according to Peterson, is not a mere external utterance; it is a self-involving act where the worshiper actively participates in the trinitarian life, praying to the Father, through the Spirit, in the name of

[18] David Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing: Formation through Contemporary Worship Music*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series, ed. John D. Witvliet (Eerdmans, 2021), 34.

[19] Similarly, "*Thy will be done* can apply both to men's obedience to God's will in the world today (cf. the very personal use of the same phrase by Jesus in 26:42) and to the ultimate working out of God's purpose for the world" (R. T. France, *Matthew*, TNTC [InterVarsity Press, 1985], 139, emphasis original).

[20] Paul Bunyan, "I Will Pray with the Spirit (1663) in *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded: The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan Series*, vol. 2, ed. Richard L. Greaves (Oxford University Press, 1976), 235.

[21] For a lovely meditation on perichoretic relations of the Trinity and its application in the practice of the Christian life, see Peter L. Leithart, *Traces of the Trinity: Signs of God in Creation and Human Experience* (Brazos, 2015).

Christ.[22] We are first "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4) and then privileged to pray through Christ as we participate in him.[23]

Prayer as Participation in Christ

The Christian's participation in Christ is a fixed reality at the moment of salvation, for "No part of human identity goes untouched by union with Christ—one's life is found in Christ, by the Spirit, in service to the Father."[24] This union we share with Christ is related to, yet distinct from, our communion with Christ. While union with Christ is an ontological claim (*being* in Christ) communion is a lived expression of that reality. John Owen brings great clarity to this distinction, noting that union is a fixed identity effectuated by the Holy Spirit, whereas "our communion, then, with God consisteth in his communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from

[22] Eugene H. Peterson reflects on the grammatical use of middle voice and connects it to union with Christ through prayer, writing: "Prayer and spirituality feature participation, the complex participation of God and the human, his will and our wills. We do not abandon ourselves to the stream of grace and drown in the ocean of love, losing identity. We do not pull the strings that activate God's operations in our lives, subjecting God to our assertive identity. We neither manipulate God (active voice) nor are manipulated by God (passive voice). We are involved in the action and participate in its results but do not control or define it (middle voice). Prayer takes place in the middle voice" (*The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* [Eerdmans, 1989], 103–4).

[23] Of course, all of life is trinitarian participation for the Christian, this is not unique to prayer. However, prayer is a direct, intentional, and semantic engagement with trinitarian activity in the act of relational communion. Although there is debate around which member of the Trinity to address prayer to, D. Glenn Butner Jr. argues that this problem is solved through the doctrine of trinitarian perichoresis: "Because of the mutual indwelling and interpenetration of perichoresis, the Father, Son, and Spirit are a single mind, consciousness, and love, fitting the Christological-compatibility criterion of divine personhood. Yet, we cannot go as far as to say that this perichoresis reduces God to a single subject, meaning that this mind is simultaneously and equally the mind of Father, Son, and Spirit, three who act in one operation. Perichoresis also allows us to affirm two patterns of prayer. One pattern emphasizes the tripersonality of God and addresses each divine person without denying a single deity. The other pattern of prayer addresses God as a single listener but intends to pray to all three" (*Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* [Baker Academic, 2022], 139).

[24] J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Baker Academic, 2011), 11.

that *union* which in Jesus Christ we have with him."[25] For Owen, prayer is an expression of this communion that is representative of active participation of the whole being's orientation toward God.[26] Union with Christ is settled and inseverable, yet communion must be nourished and maintained, not unlike human relationships. Prayer reflects the union (already) with Christ as well as a nourishing communion with him.

Prayer is the primary act that enacts and nourishes this communion, since it is the concrete form of the believer's return to God. It is the way the believer participates in Christ's own life before the Father and learns to live out the identity already secured in union. Union with Christ is settled and inseverable, but communion must be continually received and practiced. Prayer is therefore not merely a devotional discipline; it is participation in Christ's filial posture toward the Father and the relational rhythm that sustains life in him. Because communion with Christ is relational and dialogical, prayer constitutes the essential form of Christian worship, shaping the gathering as an act of shared participation in the life of the Son offered to the Father by the Spirit.

Prayer as Participation in the Holy Spirit

Paul's witness in Romans unveils a mysterious and lovely truth at the heart of Christian prayer: All prayer participates in the Holy Spirit, for it is the Spirit who prays within us, addressing the Father through our creaturely voices. C. F. D. Moule captures this reality by reminding us that the Christian's cry of "Abba!" is not merely human speech but the Spirit's own voice sounding within us (Rom. 8:15; Gal 4:6). As he puts it, "the Holy Spirit within us enables us to address God," so fully that the "Spirit's voice turns out to be, as it were, the voice of God addressing himself from within man."[27] Prayer, then, is fundamentally participatory; it is our being

[25] John Owen, "Communion with God," in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (Johnson & Hunter; 1850–1855; reprint by Banner of Truth, 1965), 2:81 (emphasis original).

[26] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 2:49–58.

[27] C. F. D. Moule, *The Holy Spirit*, Contemporary Christian Insights (Continuum, 2000), 81–82.

taken up into God's own self-communicating life.[28] The Holy Spirit creates a "coordinated form of doxology" between God and creature.[29] David Lemley confirms that this same participatory dynamic applies to all of Christian worship: "As the people of God offer worship in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father, they are drawn into the dynamic relational movement of God's being—the perichoretic motion of God's self-offering love.… Worship, humanity's response to this gift of God's self, is participation in God's self-communication."[30] What takes place in prayer, therefore is not one liturgical act alongside others but the very form of Christian worship itself.

If prayer is the mode of participation in God's life, and worship is participation in God's life, then worship must assume the form of prayer. Therefore, a non-dialogical liturgy undermines its own ontology. Because covenant life consists of being addressed by God and answering him, the liturgy must reflect this covenant logic. Participation in God's life always assumes God's speech and our response; a dialogical liturgy is simply the form of communion made visible.

"Pray Without Ceasing" as Liturgical Logic

Prayer (listening to and addressing God directly) is the act that most clearly signifies the worshiper's belief that God is truly present. For this reason, recovering prayer in gathered worship cannot be accomplished simply by inserting additional isolated moments of spoken prayer. What is needed is a reimagining of prayer as *the* privileged language of Christian worship. Constance Cherry captures this well: "The entire liturgy needs

[28] John Calvin makes this point clear in his discussion of prayer in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (3.20.1): "Just as faith is born from the gospel, so through it our hearts are trained to call upon God's name [Rom 10:14–17]. And this is precisely what [the apostle] had said a little before: the Spirit of adoption, who seals the witness of the gospel in our hearts [Rom 8:16] raises up our spirits to dare to show forth to God their desires, to stir up unspeakable groanings [Rom. 8:26], and confidently cry, 'Abba! Father!' [Rom 8:15]." According to Calvin, prayer is a gift resulting from union with Christ. Calvin states that the Spirit is "witness to us of the same adoption, through whom with free and full voice we may cry, 'Abba, Father.' Therefore whenever any hesitation shall hinder us, let us remember to ask him to correct our fearfulness, and set before us that Spirit that he may guide us to pray boldly" (3.20.37).

[29] Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Spirit of God and Worship: The Liturgical Grammar of the Holy Spirit," in *Spirit of God: Christian Renewal in the Community of Faith*, Wheaton Theology Conference Series, ed. Jeffrey W. Barbeau and Beth Felker Jones (IVP Academic, 2015), 195.

[30] Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing*, 26.

to be viewed as prayer. To misunderstand this basic point is to misunderstand worship. Prayer *in* worship is good; worship *as* prayer is better yet."[31] Cherry is not advocating the removal of dedicated moments of prayer. Rather, she calls us to understand worship itself as sustained divine-human dialogue, instead of confining prayer to those brief intervals when heads are bowed and hands are folded.

If truly biblical worship follows Scripture's rules *and* invites us into Scripture's reality, then entering that realm requires more than hearing about it, it requires immersion. I have argued that prayer is the primary mode by which believers become consciously immersed in God's reality, because prayer is the form of speech proper to those who live within the biblical world. Worshipers cannot step in and out of God's relational presence, so the liturgy must help them inhabit it.[32] Because gathered worship is the church's central site of spiritual formation, it must make this relational ontology visible by immersing the congregation in the dialogical rhythm of prayer, hearing God's address and responding in communion. This rhythm, therefore, should function as the *ordo* of worship. Prayer is the expression of a covenant relationship and the act that most directly nurtures participatory involvement in God's life. When it structures the service, it grounds worship in the very world the Bible proclaims and therefore becomes thoroughly "biblical."

Although, as Graham Hughes observes, "It is commonplace that the

[31] Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 144 (emphasis original).

[32] Richard Bauckham's insights on the misunderstanding of God's omnipresence are helpful here. He challenges the idea that God's omnipresence is spatial. A spatial omnipresence can be impersonal. Bauckham argues that rather than conceiving of God's presence spatially, "God's presence is personal and active. He wills and acts to be present to every creature at every moment. But this fundamental sense in which God is present to all creatures at all times in the same way is not the focus of concern in the Bible because, while it underlies our relationship with God, like everything else, we become conscious of it only when God engages with us as specific persons, whether individuals or groups. Even Psalm 139:7–10, which is often cited as biblical testimony to God's 'omnipresence,' is not concerned to affirm simply that 'God is everywhere.' What matters to the psalmist is that wherever he may go—even to the furthest reaches of the cosmos—God will find him there…. It is a matter of God's fully personal and active presence to the psalmist in particular" (*Who Is God? Key Moments of Biblical Revelation* [Baker Academic, 2020], 12–13). The particularity of God's presence, therefore, is the only proper precondition for worship.

liturgy is dialectic in its structure,"[33] many Christian worship services often neither look nor feel dialogical. Recovering a truly dialogical liturgy, therefore, begins where Scripture begins, with prayer as the primary form of relational and covenantal communion. For this reason, all biblical worship must participate in the logic of prayer, which is a life lived in continuous awareness of God's relational presence. Paul's exhortation to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17) envisions precisely this ongoing dialogue with Christ.[34] Leon Morris explains the application of this text:

> It is not possible for us to spend all our time with the words of prayer on our lips, but it is possible for us to be all our days in the spirit of prayer, realizing our dependence on God for all we have and are, being conscious of his presence with us wherever we may be, and yielding ourselves continually to him to do his will. Such an inward state will of course find expression from time to time in verbal prayer.[35]

Paul's vision is not ritualistic unbroken prayer, but a life awakened to God's constant presence and activity. Don Saliers likewise explains that "worship as ongoing prayer is a sustaining activity of acknowledging the divine in all circumstances."[36] The immersive grammar of prayer trains Christians to see the world as it truly is and to perceive God's reality as their own. If prayer is the primary means by which worshipers are awakened to God's realm, then the dialogical rhythm of prayer must shape the very structure of worship so that the service forms believers in the habit of hearing God's voice and answering him, not as an occasional act, but as the pattern of their life with God. Thus the call to "pray without ceasing" becomes the call to order worship so that God's people learn, week by week, to live awake to his presence and responsive to his voice.

Prayer as the *Ordo* of Biblical Worship

Evangelicals have become increasingly attentive to liturgical structures

[33] Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning: A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity,* Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 160.

[34] This exhortation appears in four different epistles: Eph 6:17–18, Phil 4:4–7, Col 4:2, and 1 Thess 5:16–18.

[35] Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, TNTC (InterVarsity Press, 1984), 104.

[36] Don Saliers, "God and Worship," in *Theological Foundations of Worship: Biblical, Systematic, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Khalia J. Williams and Mark A. Lamport (Baker Academic, 2021), 58.

(i.e., gospel-structured worship, Scripture-guided, ancient-future, etc.),[37] and these developments rightly emphasize the importance of rehearsing the biblical narrative as a way of keeping worshipers inside the gospel story. What remains underdeveloped, however, is not simply *how* the story is presented but *how worshipers participate in it*. A liturgy may faithfully represent the drama of redemption, but representation is not the same as participation. Worship invites people into the gospel only insofar as the *ordo* enables them to inhabit the relationship to the gospel story, as a covenantal insider.

Terrance Cuneo's "*immersion model* of liturgical reenactment" clarifies this point. Cuneo challenges the assumption that the liturgy's primary purpose is merely remembering or ritually re-presenting the gospel narrative. Instead, he argues, "The dominant purpose of immersion is to let participants open themselves up to and appropriate the riches of the narrative, often by identifying with its characters in such a way that they construct and revise their narrative identities."[38] In other words, immersion, rather than recollection, is the formative engine of worship, because immersion alone enables genuine participation in the drama of redemption.

If the goal of the gathering is discipleship (Eph 4), then worship must cultivate not periodic awareness (as with occasional spoken prayers) but immersive wakefulness to the realities of the gospel. Kevin Vanhoozer explains,

> The vocation of the disciple is to wake up to what is real—the meaning of the whole history revealed in Christ—and to stay awake…. Both prayer and theology help us remain awake and aware of the truth of our being in Christ, the reality of our adoption into God's family with all the rights and responsibilities that entail.[39]

For this reason, prayer cannot function merely as transitional filler, a kind

[37] Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Baker, 2009); Joseph Crider, *Scripture-Guided Worship: A Call to Pastors and Worship Leaders* (Seminary Hill Press, 2021); Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Baker, 2008).

[38] Terrance Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 87.

[39] Kevin Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom* (IVP Academic, 2016), 195. Vanhoozer cites C. S. Lewis on the relationship between prayer and reality: "The moment of prayer is for me … the awareness, the re-awakened awareness that this 'real world' and 'real self' are very far from being rock bottom realities" (C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* [Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964], 81 as cited in Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 195).

of liturgical caulking between more "substantive" elements. Utilitarian prayer, such as the facilitation of transitions, undermines the very communion it is meant to express. Prayer does not just bind together disparate worship elements, prayer binds worshipers to a wakefulness to God's relational presence.

Prayer needs to stand at the obvious center of Christian worship because the reality it expresses, that we gather in God's active and relational presence, is too easily overlooked. A prayer-shaped *ordo* that continually hears God's address from his word and responds to him directly wears the heart of the Christian life on its sleeve. It signals that worship is not passive absorption but active, self-conscious participation in the life of Christ. Such dialogical worship forms a generative grammar by which worshipers learn to see their whole lives immersed in God's presence.[40] When prayer provides the structural rhythm of worship, leaders cultivate not merely attendees but disciples who, according to Vanhoozer, are people who are fully awake to the living God.

Teaching Within the Dialogue

The premise of this article has been that Christians do not neglect prayer because they lack knowledge of its value or proper procedure, but because they lack the ontological precondition for prayer, the conviction that God is truly present and inviting them into immediate, relational communion.[41] Thus, the corrective is not primarily procedural. Yet if, as I have suggested, the rhythm of dialogue with God should be the grammar of Christian worship, told through both the structure of the service and the content, then the purpose of teaching is also clarified. Christian worship is sustained, Spirit-enabled prayer—corporate, second-person dialogue with God—rooted in his self-revelation and mediated through Christ. This means that when God's Word is taught, it is not just a detached description of God; it is the portion of the dialogue when God speaks.

When God is spoken about in a didactic sense, it ought to be to amplify his voice in the dialogue. "Since God is personal," D. A. Carson explains, "it should come as no surprise to find that his relationship to

[40] I will note that the contemporary evangelical church frequently features a version of liturgical immersion through the aesthetic logic of "flow" which aims to immerse worshipers in an unbroken atmosphere of worshipful feeling rather than in immersion in awareness and engagement with God's redemptive presence. I think, in many ways, that aesthetic flow is a substitute for a real ontological awareness and is often a cheap substitute for relational abiding in worship.

[41] See afterword of *Calling on the Name of the Lord* for Millar's more pragmatic diagnosis for why the church is praying less (pp. 233–36).

humans involves two-way speech."[42] Teaching of doctrine and theology, that is to say, that which is didactic, is a receptive exercise, the listening part of the divine-human dialogue that is worship. In corporate worship, worshipers speak about God didactically to amplify his voice in the dialogue.[43] Hans Urs von Balthasar explicates this relationship between God's Word and prayer:

> Whatever could we say to God if he himself had not taken the first step in communicating and manifesting himself to us in his word, so that we have access to him and fellowship with him? For we have been permitted to glimpse his inner nature, to enter into it, into the inner core of eternal truth; bathed in this light which radiates upon us from God, we ourselves become light and transparent before him. All of the sudden we just *know:* prayer is a conversation in which God's word has the initiative and we, for the moment, can be nothing more than listeners. The essential thing is for us to hear God's word and discover from it how to respond to him.… God's word is his invitation to us to be with him in the truth.[44]

The preacher is not "above the action" as the narrator of an epic, but a participant in it as an actor in the drama of divine communion.[45] The

[42] Carson, *Praying with Paul*, 22.

[43] Graham Hughes argues that the preacher is a "sensible sign" of God through human agents: "All the significations of worship require to be articulated in sensible signs (that is, in this case through human agents), some*one* has to speak on God's behalf; and someone has to speak the human response…. All this still leave's God's side of the dialogue needing expression: *someone* has to speak *in God's place*, or *in persona Christi* as one formulation has it. The fact, then, that leaders—often but not exclusively the presiding minister—must sometimes speak for God and sometimes as the people's spokesperson means that their role oscillates. Sometimes, so to say, they speak *from* God's side *into* the assembly; and sometimes they are speaking *to* God from *within* the congregation" (*Worship as Meaning*, 161).

[44] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (Ignatius Press, 1986), 15 (emphasis original).

[45] Kevin Vanhoozer explains the effect of the "epic" orientation of modern philosophy: "An epic is a story told from above, usually in the voice of an omniscient narrator who stands nowhere in particular, located as they are above the action. Epic poetry strives to attain a kind of impersonal objectivity. It states what has happened and how things are and does so without intruding a personal point of view or, indeed, any form of subjectivity whatsoever." Contrary to the conception of Christianity as a detached epic, Vanhoozer highlights the importance of seeing Christianity as a personal drama: "In drama, embodied human beings are themselves the medium of aesthetic expression, not as solitary individuals but in intersection with others" (*Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 220).

didactic, therefore, must be offered as an act of listening in for the congregation so they may respond more fully and faithfully. Teaching must not "lose the plot" of Christian worship, as it can easily do when detached from its proper end. Preaching is not merely for the transmission of knowledge, but for the cultivation of communion. Christianity is what Vanhoozer calls a "theodrama." Therefore, he argues, "Disciples require not merely theoretical but *theodramatic* understanding: a grasp not only of what God has said and done, but also of what we must say and do in response in order to participate rightly in his action."[46] The drama of Christian worship is domesticated when the didactic is severed from the dialogical. Preaching and other forms of exhortation fulfill their purpose only when they lead the congregation into responsive participation in God's presence rather than leaving them as observers of divine action.[47]

Keeping Worship Dialogical

If prayer is the grammar of Christian worship, then keeping worship dialogical in the gathering cannot be reduced to adding more prayers or merely selecting better language. It requires attentiveness to how the shape, pacing, and speech of the worship service either cultivate or obscure the reality that God is truly addressing his people and inviting their response. The following practices are not offered as a prescriptive liturgical template, but as concrete ways leaders may help make visible what is already true: that worship, like all of life, is a sustained act of divine-human dialogue. Each practice aims to train worshipers to hear God's voice and to answer him directly, so that gathered worship forms a people capable of living *coram Deo* beyond the service itself.

1. Allow Scripture to function as divine address. Many services read and teach Scripture but do not explicitly treat it as God speaking. Simple cues can recalibrate this posture. Introduce readings with expressions such as "Hear the Word of the Lord, spoken to us" or "Listen to the Words the Holy Spirit inspired for us," and then conclude with "This is God's Word to you." Such statements make the dialogical claim explicit. After reading,

[46] Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 229 (emphasis original).

[47] Karl Barth makes this argument: "Human thought and speech cannot be *about* God, but must be directed *toward* God, called into action by the divine thought and speech directed to men, and following and corresponding to this work of God…. True and proper language concerning God will always be a response to God, which overtly or covertly, explicitly, or implicitly, thinks and speaks of God exclusively in the second person. And this means that theological work must really and truly take place in the form of a liturgical act, as invocation of God, and as prayer" (*Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* [Eerdmans, 1963], 160).

leave several seconds of silence so worshipers can receive what God has said and God's Word is heard as part of a conversation rather than content. These small but intentional adjustments shift Scripture from content to encounter and open space for worshipers to be addressed by God's relational Word rather than merely informed by theological content.

2. Frame prayers as direct, second-person address. Prayer trains the congregation in the grammar of relational participation when it is consistently offered as direct, second-person address to God. Language such as, "You, O Lord …," "We come to You …," "Speak, Lord …," and "Father, we receive your mercy …," reinforces that corporate prayer is only one side of an ongoing dialogue, rather than commentary, filler, or transition. When leaders pray in this way, they help worshipers inhabit the relational posture of answering God who has spoken as an outworking of his relational pursuit of his people.

3. Make invitations to respond explicit. After hearing Scripture or the proclamation of the gospel, cue the congregation: "How shall we respond to God's Word?" "Let us answer the Lord in prayer." "The Lord has spoken; now we speak back to him." These cues make the dialogical rhythm of worship transparent and help worshipers recognize their active role in responding to God's address.

4. Narrow the gap between revelation and response. Each element of the service should be a fitting answer to what God has just said or done through his Word. Too often, a specific word from God is proclaimed, only to be followed by a generic prayer that feels more like checking a liturgical box than responding to what God has just addressed. When the *ordo* aligns divine initiative with a relational response from the congregation, worship is experienced as a lived, specific, conversational, and communal order rather than as a sequence of disconnected moments. God calls, and we enter his presence; God reveals his holiness, and we confess; God absolves, and we receive mercy; God cares for the world, and we intercede; God speaks his Word, and we ask for illumination; God invites us to the Table, and we partake; God sends us, and we dedicate our lives to his service. This alignment forms worshipers to experience worship as communion, fostered through active engagement in relationship with God.

5. Incorporate silence as space for personal response. Silence in the gathering can function not as pause or "dead space" in the flow, but as a means of encounter. When worshipers hear the Lord speak, allow time for them to truly listen and speak back to him in personal prayer. Such silence communicates that worshipers are not merely absorbing information or going along with the communal flow but engaging the living God.

6. Pray like God is truly present. A leader's tone, pace, and attentiveness communicate theology. Prayers that respond specifically to what God has

revealed, offered slowly and expectantly, model belief in God's nearness. Avoiding logistical language (e.g., "Lord, as the band comes up …") or commentary disguised as prayer helps preserve prayer as genuine address rather than narration. In this way, the leader's posture trains the congregation to perceive God as actively present and attentive.

7. Prioritize meeting with God over maintaining mood. Evangelical worship often privileges aesthetic flow, sometimes at the expense of explicit divine-human dialogue. Interrupting musical continuity with Scripture or spoken prayer can re-center the service on communion rather than atmosphere. Avoiding extended sequences where no one addresses God directly helps ensure that continuity is established through relational engagement rather than emotional momentum and continuity.

8. Treat prayer as the evaluative key to the service. When assessing worship, ask: Does each moment help worshipers hear from God? Does each moment invite them to respond directly to him? Is the privileged language of our worship relational (dialogical)? Does our *ordo* make divine–human dialogue obvious? Evaluating a service through this lens helps ensure that worship remains grounded in relational address rather than commentary, and that every element arises from and returns to God's own Word.[48] Ultimately, the facilitation of worship ought to foster the communion that flows out of union with Christ.

The task of organizing worship ought not to be driven merely by what "works" to facilitate a worship gathering, but by which actions, patterns, and postures most clearly make visible the otherwise invisible realities of worship that anchor the faith of the Church. Gathered worship is formative not only in prescribing particular worship practices and doctrine, but more fundamentally in shaping how worshipers come to understand what is most true and most real. In the absence of a sacramental theology, evangelicals often struggle to articulate how, when, or even whether God is truly present in worship, what John Jefferson Davis describes as a functional ontology of "real absence."[49] The result is that worshipers easily

[48] John D. Witvliet says, "Walking away from a worship service saying, 'That organist played a fabulous introduction to the opening hymn' is like walking away from a dinner party and saying, 'The wine was especially fragrant.' It may be altogether true—but beside the point. It would be much better to say, 'Today that music helped me to pray'" (*Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* [Baker Academic, 2003], 240).

[49] Davis observes that the evangelical struggle to understand how God is present in worship was an unintended consequence of the Reformation: "In their different ways the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the philosophies of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and the revivalism of nineteenth-century evangelicalism contributed to the impoverishment of the Protestant Doxological imagination and practices of worship." Davis identifies the central theological and ecclesiological corrections brought about through the Reformation, but suggests, "At the same time, however, we can ask if the Reformation had unintended detrimental consequences for subsequent Protestant practices of worship. For example, did Protestant rejections of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation overreact in the direction of 'real absence' memorial views?" (John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* [IVP Academic, 2010], 79).

become consumers of theological content rather than participants in a divine dialogue with a God whose real presence with his Church fulfills his ancient covenants with his chosen and beloved people. A dialogical gathering resists this drift by training the congregation to recognize God's relational presence as the defining reality of their life before him—the presence through which they are known and named as his children. In this sense, keeping worship dialogical is not an optional enrichment but an expression of what it means to "pray without ceasing" as a gathered body, learning in worship the rhythm of attention and response that defines a relational life before God.

Conclusion

The concerns about prayer's diminishment raised at the beginning of this article are not simply critiques of procedural missteps; they point to a deeper absence. At its core, this absence reveals a presuppositional problem: many Christians struggle to imagine God as truly, relationally present in worship. One contributing reason, I have suggested, is that the didactic has quietly become the privileged language of evangelical worship. No single practice is to blame, yet the cumulative effect is that worshipers are habituated to speak *about* God far more than they speak *to* him. Such a pattern inevitably constricts the theological imagination, leaving worshipers ill-prepared to perceive the God who, by the Spirit through Christ, is actually present.

Graham Hughes poses a question that proves diagnostic for our worship: "How *apparent* is this dialectical quality to those who are its participants?"[50] The more clearly our liturgies reveal this conversational, relational dynamic, the more our worshipers' imaginations can be healed, enabling them to perceive God's gracious nearness rather than merely hear about it. When worship is shaped primarily by didactic speech, prayer

[50] Hughes, *Worship as Meaning,* 161 (emphasis original).

becomes an optional sidebar rather than the animating grammar of our communion with God. But when prayer becomes the privileged language of worship, worshipers are reoriented to the God who addresses and receives them.

For this reason, the recovery of prayer cannot be reduced to adding more discrete prayer moments, as if prayer were simply one practice among others. Worship itself must be reclaimed as a holistic act of prayer: God initiates through his self-revelation, and his people answer in love, trust, and obedience. Prayer, then, is not a spiritual technique but the very ontology of worship—the mode of life in which God is known as present, and the church knows itself as gathered *coram Deo*.