

Interview with J. Ligon Duncan III

J. Ligon Duncan III is the Chancellor and CEO of Reformed Theological Seminary, where he also serves as the President of RTS Jackson and the John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology. He is an editor and contributing author to Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship (P&R, 2003) and The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly (Mentor, 2003–2009). He is also the author of When Pain Is Real and God Seems Silent: Finding Hope in the Psalms (Crossway, 2020) and 1 & 2 Thessalonians for You (The Good Book Company, 2023).

1. *What is meaningful to you about corporate worship gatherings for the people of God?*

There are a lot of ways that I could answer that question. I think I need to start by saying my upbringing gave me a wonderful example of an experience of public worship. My mother was from a long, wonderful line of Southern Baptists. She graduated from Carson Newman, which was one of the state Baptist colleges in Tennessee. She did her masters work in church music at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. In fact, she cataloged the church music library for accreditation in the 1950s. Then, she eventually taught in the music department at Furman University. All the while, she worked in Baptist churches in North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia and South Carolina in the area of music. She was a wonderful soloist, a pianist, and a choir director.

With who my mother was, there was no way that I was going to be allowed to grow up not singing in her home. And so, singing was a huge part of my life—singing at home, singing hymns around the piano at home, singing in children’s choirs at church, and singing in public worship. The great thing about mom was that she was not just interested in music; she was interested in the entirety of public worship. She was very determined to utilize her musical skill and experience to enhance the participation of the congregation in public worship. It was not a performance for her. It was about helping the people of God sing the praises of God and come before his presence with thanksgiving. So, I cannot even talk about this topic without just being thankful that God gave me a mother like that—a godly, smart, hard-working mother that loved the church, loved the gospel, loved her Savior and wanted the congregation to come before his presence with thanksgiving and bring their praises to him.

Let me give a testimony to my dad as well. My dad came from a long

line of Presbyterians, and in fact he was an eighth generation Southern Presbyterian elder. My father was not a pastor. He was a lay elder in our congregation. My dad could not carry a tune in the bucket. He had a wonderful, mellifluous speaking voice, but he just couldn’t match pitch. And somewhere along the line, a music teacher had told him he was monotone. Because of all this, his singing was awful—but in a way that is still pleasing to God. I can remember as a little boy, because Mom was in the choir loft, I would sit with my dad in the pew. Even though he was not a strong singer, he tried to sing every single hymn. And I can’t tell you what it meant to me. Here he was a manly man, a United States Marine from the Second World War, who’s singing hymns! He knew it was his job to get in there and make a joyful noise to the Lord, and that was all he could do. But even as a boy, I thought: “God must be pretty important for my dad to try and sing his praises.”

My boyhood pastor was such a faithful preacher, and he too cared about everything in public worship. There are some men in the ministry that are gifted in preaching but do not care about anything else but the sermon. I never had that experience from the pastors that I grew up under. They cared about everything from the call to worship to the benediction. They cared about it all. And they wanted to spread a feast before the people of God that pointed to Christ, was based on the gospel, and was rooted in the Word.

So, looking back, I can appreciate it all, and my church experience is probably like the church experience of a lot of Protestants in my generation. Whether you are a Baptist or Congregationalist or Presbyterian or low-church Anglican or whatever you were, our worship services actually looked very similar. They were packed with prayer, packed with Scripture, packed with faithful preaching, packed with good singing, packed with the administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. That’s a lot to pack in to sixty to seventy-five minutes of public worship. But boy, is it good stuff to pack in!

I grew up caring about public worship. I grew up looking forward to public worship, for the most part. I certainly went through the motions sometimes as an adolescent. I certainly had moments like that, but I also had moments of a real sense of the presence of God, a real sense of God communicating himself to us through his Word, a real sense of God doing business with my soul, a real sense of “Wow, I’m amongst people, people that love God and love his Word and believe in Christ, and they care about the gospel.” All of these things impacted me profoundly. I have no doubt they contributed to how I approach public worship today. And so, I just want to give testimony to what was given to me. I get no credit for that. It was a gift to me from God and from these faithful Christians.

2. *You have devoted a certain amount of your energy and your ministry to researching and writing on the topic of public worship. What motivates you to research and write on the topic of corporate worship?*

As a pastor, it is woven into our job. Not only did I have good examples from my boyhood pastor and my teenage pastor, but when I was in seminary, I studied under a man named Robert G. Rayburn, who had written a book called *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (Baker, 1980). Rayburn cared about worship, and he was a wonderful musician. He directed the church choir at the church I attended, and I had the privilege of singing in his choir and being taken under his wing.

Another one was DuPre Rhame. DuPre Rhame was the chairman of the Fine Arts division at Furman University, and he directed the music at First Baptist Church in Greenville, SC in the 1960s. When I was a teenager, DuPre took interest in me and just sort of poured into me and mentored me. So, God put a series of men in my life: Gordon Reed, my boyhood pastor; Paul Settle, my teenage pastor; DuPre Rhame, the choir director at our church when I was a teenager who had been at First Baptist; Bing Vick, who was the director of the choirs at Furman University; and Robert G Rayburn. I had this series of men in my life—all of whom cared about public worship and were involved in supporting public worship of the congregation. So, I grew up caring about those things.

And then as a pastor, so much of my time was spent preparing for public worship: What Scriptures are we going to read? What Bible books are we going to preach through? What hymns or songs or psalms are we going to sing? How are we going to do the prayers in public worship? What should the benediction be? What should the call to worship be? How do we connect this to any special music that's being done in the service? How do we work baptism and the Lord's Supper in the service? So, partly because of the people who had fed into my life and partly because of the responsibility that I had working in local churches, corporate worship was just an area of great interest to me.

I also want to write on corporate worship because there is a growing interest in this area—perhaps more interest amongst Protestants in the last twenty-five years than there would have been maybe in the middle of the twentieth century. And that just makes me happy. I look around and I see people that are serious about worship. Not just about singing and not just about music, but they're concerned about the whole of public worship. And that encourages me greatly. So, I guess I want to help edify pastors, edify those that have responsibilities in preparing for public wor-

ship, and help congregation members think biblically about public worship. It is an area that is a part of our life as Christians that we want to understand. When you see Christians realize the significance of what is happening in congregational worship, they get more out of it when they're more excited about it. They realize how it feeds them; they realize how they need it. That's what I wanted my congregation to realize. I guess that's why I've written in this area so much.

3. *You mention the Bible. How would you explain the significance of the Scriptures for public worship?*

Obviously, there are different ways you can approach that question. You can approach that question historically. You can approach that question textually in the Bible, and you can approach that question theologically. Let me do a little bit of all three of those things. First of all, readers should be familiar with the epic work of Hughes Oliphant Old on *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Church*, 7 vols. (Eerdmans, 1998–2010). It's a seven-volume work. One of the things that Dr. Old says in that series is that the reading and preaching of the Scripture has been at the heart of public worship from the very beginning. He says the sermon initially was a commentary on the portion of reading that was being done in the public worship, and he can take you back as far as we can go back into the post Apostolic era and show you that in Christian history.

We also have a lot of resources on the history of Christian worship that point to us why the Bible is so important to public worship. Textually, the very first public worship service recorded in the Bible is in Exodus 24. And at the heart of that public worship is the reading of the Word. After God speaks the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and scares the living daylights out of the Israelites at Mount Sinai, Moses goes up on the mountain and receives the elaboration on those Ten Commandments, which is recorded in Exodus 21, 22, and 23. When he comes back down, we are told three things in Exodus 24. Having heard those words from the Lord, (1) Moses told them to the people, (2) he wrote them down, and (3) he read them from the Book of the Covenant (Exod 24:7). It's the first time that phrase is used in the Bible—the Book of the Covenant—which is the technical term for everything that comes after the Ten Commandments all the way to the end of Exodus 23. And from that time on, every time you see the people of God gather in the Bible, the Bible is always read. Every time in the rest of the Bible that the people of God gather, the Bible is read. It's incredible. You're not only watching the first public worship service, you're watching the first inscripturation of the canon. When you're looking at Exodus 24, this is where the canon begins.

It begins with Moses writing down the Book of the Covenant.

But from a theological standpoint, John 4 is really huge to me. By the way, is it not a picture of God's grace that Jesus chooses to have the most significant conversation in the history of the world on the topic of worship with a woman who's been married five times and is living with a guy? And in the course of that conversation, he says something that's really important to all of us. He says God is spirit and he must be worshipped in spirit and truth (John 4:24). What I want all of us to take in there is Jesus is saying that our worship must be in accordance with the nature of who God is. And if God is spirit, we need to ask a question: How do you approach a spirit? You can't see a spirit. You don't know where the spirit is. The biblical answer to that question is you can only approach a spirit in the way that the spirit tells you to approach. And therefore, the only way we know how to approach God is how God tells us to approach him. That's of course what Jesus goes on to tell her. You know that he says, God is seeking worshippers to worship him in spirit and in truth. Jesus goes on to say, "You're going to need a mediator to worship him. And by the way, I'm that mediator!" And of course, that is when she gets converted. She suddenly turns into an evangelist! She's running back into the village, saying, "I think I just found the Messiah!" But the context for all of this is a conversation about worship.

So for me, it's so important for people to understand the only way I can approach God is the way that God tells me to approach him. And the way that he tells me to approach him is in the Bible. Therefore, I need to make sure that the way that I think about worship is directed by the Bible. I need to make sure that the structure of worship is informed by the Bible. I need to make sure that the content of worship is filled with a Bible. So those are three different ways that I can kind of go with that question.

4. From your perspective, what constitutes biblical worship? How would you describe what is biblical worship, recognizing that various congregations and contexts might come to different conclusions of their use of the phrase "biblical worship"?

I'm a free church Protestant. I love my Anglican brothers, I love my Lutheran brothers, but I'm a free church Protestant. Presbyterians, Baptists, and Congregationalists—all of us free church Protestants—believe there is no prescribed liturgy in the Bible. What you have is principles and you have elements. So, the Bible gives you principles for how public worship should be done. It gives you content or elements that need to be in public worship. But it doesn't give you a prescribed liturgy that all of us have to follow every Sunday. When I teach theology of worship at RTS, one of the principles that I tell my students is that there's not just one right way of doing this, but there are more wrong ways of doing it than

there are right ways of doing it. So, the great thing about biblical public worship is it's not going to be one size fits all.

If we go to South Africa or to South America or to Indonesia or to Canada or to Scotland, we're going to see some variety in what will very, very legitimately be called biblical public worship. That is, people are wanting to be biblical, they're being informed by the Bible, and the content of what they're doing in public worship is filled with the Bible. But there are going to be some differences. And I don't think that should concern us. I think what we want is we want people to be biblically-directed in what they're doing in public worship.

But if I were going to define what biblically-directed public worship is, I would say public worship is congregational worship aimed at giving God the glory due to his name and engaging with God on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible. And that's of course through Jesus Christ. So, it's got to be radically based on the person and work of Jesus Christ so that he is glorified and we are edified.

5. In your own work, you advocate for a specific liturgical model that consists of five phrases: read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible.¹ Why is this your preferred liturgical model and why do you prefer it to other liturgical models?

There is no question that these five elements have had an experiential influence on me, in my home and in my church life. And I appreciate the type of worship that could be characterized as read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, see the Bible in the ordinances of baptism in the Lord's Supper. But upon further reflection, for me, it is important to acknowledge the Protestant theology of special revelation. Anybody that believes in the inerrancy, inspiration, authority of the Bible will appreciate that the Bible is fundamentally a message from God to us. It is God talking about God to his people. And if that is the case and we want to commune with God, the only way we can commune with God is in the way that he has revealed himself. If we are going to commune with God, then I think that ought to be one of our agendas when we come to public worship. I want to commune with the living God. Now, I do not want to do that in isolation. I want to do that with my brothers and sisters. So, how am I going to commune with the living God?

I'm going to commune with the living God in the way that he has revealed himself to me, and he's revealed himself to me in the Word. I tell

¹ J. Ligon Duncan III, "Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2003), 65.

pastors: in public worship, you are facilitating a Word-mediated encounter between your people and the living God. So, notice, the pastor is not the mediator. We are not the mediator. Jesus is the mediator, but the instrument that he has chosen to mediate his presence to us is the Word. This means that the whole public worship service needs to be generated by the Word. In a sense, the minister's job sometimes is to get out of the way and just let the Word be center stage. We may be the one standing behind the pulpit or the podium, but the main thing is God. And we are there to facilitate a Word-mediated encounter between God and his people.

And if that's true, then read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, see the Bible is a really helpful way to think about worship. Everywhere people look in worship, I want them to say, "Man, there's a lot of Bible in this worship service. You know, I can't get away from the Bible. The Bible keeps coming. It keeps coming to me in the pastor's prayers. It's coming to me in the songs that we're singing. It's coming to me in the Scripture reading. It's coming to me in the sermon." Baptism is another ripe opportunity. I've been in public worship services where the sermon was awful, but then it came time for the baptism to happen and this ordinance was a glorious description of the gospel. So, the Bible should be everywhere in public worship. We want the Word to be mediating our encounters with the living God.

6. *In another one of your articles, this model is presented as a traditional evangelical perspective on worship.² What do those words "traditional evangelical" add to our understanding of your liturgical model?*

I think that the title was probably assigned to me, but I believe in the categorization. If you and I transported ourselves back to the nineteenth century in North America or in England and we walked into a Baptist Church or a Presbyterian Church or a Congregationalist church or even a Methodist Church, we'd walk out—especially from today's perspective—and look at one another and say, "You know what, all those public services of worship, they're pretty much alike. They're all doing the same thing." So, what I was trying to capture is I'm not just talking about a Presbyterian approach to public worship. This model is what low-church evangelicals have been doing in worship for five hundred years. This is just how we've done things together until probably the 1950s and 1960s. In that era, Protestants started introducing new forms of worship, and different denominations went our separate ways after that.

² J. Ligon Duncan III, "Traditional Evangelical Worship," in *Perspectives on Christian Worship: Five Views*, ed. J. Matthew Pinson (B&H Academic, 2009), 105.

7. *Your liturgical model lists five elements—read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible in the ordinances. In what ways are any of these elements underdeveloped, underappreciated, or misunderstood by Christian congregations today?*

I really think I could say a little bit about each one of them. Let me just start off with reading. One of the sad things for me is that I can go to a Bible-believing congregation and not hear the Bible read very much. By this, I mean the pastor, the leaders, the people—they really believe the Bible but they don't read it out loud in worship. And I'm pointing at my own people. A friend of mine from Scotland went to a PCA public worship service, and—shockingly—he said the Bible was never opened and that nobody should ever be able to say that about our public worship.

Liturgical, high-church traditions read the Bible all over the place in their public services. Evangelical Bible-reading churches ought to make sure that the Bible is being read. And I don't just mean the two or three verses that the preacher is going to preach out of. I think there ought to be at least a chapter of Bible reading in every public worship service, or at least a good portion of a chapter.

What if we spent as much time trying to figure out what we were going to read in public worship service as we did figuring out what Bible books we were going to preach through? So if we were preaching a NT book, we tried to make sure we were reading the Old Testament. If we were preaching an OT book, we tried to make sure that we were reading the New Testament. We really thought long and hard about what we were reading in public worship.

In the Westminster Directory, it actually recommends that you read one chapter from the OT and one chapter from the New Testament. I think for most congregations today that would completely blow their minds and overwhelm them. What I would want every minister to want to do is sort of gradually creep up with a substantial regular Bible reading in public worship and then help the people understand why that's important.

When I got to Jackson, the head of the theology department here at RTS asked me to meet weekly with Dr. John Reed Miller, who had been the pastor of First Presbyterian Jackson from 1952–1968. It was a real gift. One of his passions at the time was public Bible reading, and he would say to me, "Ligon, the reading of the Scriptures ought to be an event." What he meant by that is people ought to recognize this is a big deal. And so, I've always undertaken to impress upon people what a big deal it is to listen to the word of God.

So, I want to instill in our people the sense that it is a really big deal to be able to hear the Word of God read in your own language. One of the

things that I say to our people before we read the Word of God is this: “You’re about to hear something that six billion people on this planet have never heard—the Word of God read in your own language in a service of Christian worship as a means of grace.” Six billion people on this planet have never heard that. What a privilege it is that we get to hear the Word of God read to us. So, I think the reading of the Word is definitely something that we need to work on in the evangelical world. Our liturgical friends should not be able to out Bible us.

Another thing that strikes me is this: We live in a happy time where a lot of men are concerned to be good expositors. The Lord has given us lots of preaching professors and really powerful preachers in our traditions that have reminded us how important it is to be a good expositor of God’s Word. This generation probably has a larger collection of men trying to be good expositors than we had maybe in the 1960s. Preaching the Bible seems to be an area where we have made some progress in recent years.

But prayer is another area where I find evangelicals to be weak. Prayer has been reduced in a lot of places to the transition to let the worship team get on and off the stage. Prayer ought to be a big deal. A congregation by and large will learn how to pray by how their pastor prays in front of them. Now, yes, we should learn it at home with our parents. And I thank God that I got to see that at home with Mom and Dad. Mom and Dad knelt down by my bedside, and I learned a lot about prayer with them praying over me before we went to bed. I learned a lot about it at the dinner table. I learned a lot about it in youth group and in other places like that. But in public worship, boy, we learn a lot about prayer. Sadly, prayer is really absent from a lot of evangelical public worship services.

I think the last thing I want to briefly address is the content of our singing in public worship. I think one of our challenges in this generation is that people view music as something that is there to please them rather than something that is there to assist them pleasing God. That is, we sort of approach it as a consumer and we judge whatever is being done. We either like it or we don’t like it. Rather than realizing that singing is there to help us worship God, many Christians think something like, “Okay, get up there and perform for me.” I’ve been to churches where there will be people on the first three or four rows singing with the worship team or the choir or whoever it is leading in music. Then, everybody else will be standing in the back with their hands in their pockets, just sort of watching. I think we want to really make the congregation understand that this is not a performance for you. We are here to help you sing praises to the living God. We want you to give praise to God. And I think that con-

sumer mindset with regard to music in the church has hurt the congregational participation that we want to foster in public services of worship.

8. What are your hopes or your prayers for the future of corporate worship in Protestant congregations?

I would just say pastors especially ought to be readers of books about public worship so that we really know why we’re doing what we’re doing. I do not mean to clutter up the worship service with commentary, but I do think some short, incisive words can really help people. I find young people, for instance, really love it when you explain to them why you’re doing what you’re doing. Help people see the reason why we do these things in worship goes all the way back to Exod 24, as an example. I think a lot of times people just assume that we are doing it because that’s the way we’ve always done it.

It is a blessing for a preacher that is preaching the gospel to communicate the gospel without always having to preach it in the sermon. Of course I want us to preach the gospel in the sermon, but the whole service should be helping us too. Particularly in the Free Church tradition, we can feel a lot of weight on our shoulders when it comes time for the sermon to think we’ve got to do everything in that sermon. Realizing that you’ve got a biblical order of service that carries some of that weight for you is a tremendous blessing. I have often started the sermon basking in the glow of a prayer that’s been prayed and just thinking, “Oh, my heavens, there was such rich gospel truth in that prayer!” And I’ll even find myself referring back to it in the sermon. “Do you remember when Pastor so and so prayed this line ...?” It is so important to have a robust worship service that is biblically-directed. It’s a huge help to a pastor who is wanting to preach the gospel, who wants to see people converted and then built up in grace.

Lastly, I hope and pray that we would worship in spirit and truth according to God’s Word. And that people would realize that worship does the work of discipleship. If our worship is not formed and filled by the Word of God, our discipleship will be stunted. And so if our public worship is Word-filled and Word-formed, it is going to fill and form disciples according to God’s Word. Public worship is your best discipleship opportunity of the week, and you just want to make sure that you are doing the best job you can to set the table for your people with the Word of God.