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Introduction: Practicing Biblical Worship Today

Jonathan S. Welch
Guest Editor

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

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

¹ Michael A. Farley, “What Is ‘Biblical’ Worship? Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship,” *JETS* 51.3 (2008): 591–613.

² Farley, “What Is ‘Biblical’ Worship?” 591.

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

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

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

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

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

⁵ Farley, “What Is ‘Biblical’ Worship?” 591–613.

relate to worship ministry today?

Elements of Biblical Worship

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Biblical Worship Today

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer as Participation: The Dialogical Nature of Biblical Worship

Chessa Williams

California Baptist University

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

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).

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* (InterVarsity 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).

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 Christian 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 return 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), *someone* 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

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

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).

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*.

Ten Biblical Functions of Congregational Singing

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Abstract: *This essay addresses an overlooked area of concern in worship studies—the theology of congregational singing. It examines the ontology and function of song, utilizing a biblical-theological methodology to answer the question, “What does congregational singing do for the people of God?” This essay argues that to properly ‘sing the Bible,’ the church must embrace and embody the magnificent array of theological functions of congregational singing, as displayed in Christian Scripture. To sing the Bible means more than just singing biblical words. To faithfully sing the Bible, Christians must sing together in a way that reflects all of the biblical functions for congregational song. Through an exegesis of Ezra 3:10–13 and additional Scriptures from the Old and New Testaments, this essay develops ten theological functions of congregational singing.*

Key Words: *Bible, biblical, congregational song, Ezra 3:10–13, function, music, singing, theology, worship*

It is almost common nomenclature in Protestant and Free Church traditions today to consider worship as only (1) the worship gathering and (2) musical worship.¹ Indeed, many Protestant churchgoers consider a church’s “worship” to refer to only the congregational singing within the liturgy. As further evidence of reductionism, worship music is now a codified subgenre of commercial music.

The reductionisms affecting congregational worship, however, are not solely limited to the concept of “worship.” The use of music in the church is also experiencing significant oversimplification. Conversation regarding music in worship tends to reflect a view that the primary—if not sole—activity in congregational singing is the vertical praise of God. James K. A. Smith notes that “wide swaths of contemporary Christianity tend to think of worship as only an ‘upward’ act of the people of God who gather to offer up their sacrifice of praise, expressing their gratitude and devotion

to the Father, with the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.”² Smith categorizes this view as “worship-as-expression.”³ He raises this point with a desire to recover a formative dimension to Christian liturgy that can remain unseen, if not even dormant, in some congregations. For Smith, Christian worship is not just expressive; it is also formative.

Just like worship has become one-dimensional for a number of Christians, so have Christian perspectives on congregational song. Singing in worship today is largely perceived as achieving a doxological function of vertical praise to God. Although this understanding is accurate, singing as expressing praise to God is only one dimension of song, but it is not the only function mentioned in the Bible.

By utilizing a biblical-theological methodology, this essay argues that to properly “sing the Bible,”⁴ the church of Jesus Christ must embrace and embody the magnificent array of theological functions of congregational singing, as displayed in Christian Scripture. To sing the Bible means more than just singing biblical words; it also does more than merely offer up doxological praise to God. To faithfully sing the Bible, Christians must sing together in a way that reflects all of the biblical functions for congregational song.

Locating the Functions of Congregational Singing in Relevant Literature

Given the rich history of Christian discussions concerning music in the church (and the occasionally volatile nature of such discussions), there is no shortage of academic studies that speak to music for worship. Yet, a variety of approaches exist, and not all align with the argument advanced in this article. The research interests of the present study require a focused inquiry in three areas. First, relevant studies must focus on congregational song rather than music in general.⁵ Second, relevant studies must employ

² James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Baker Academic, 2013), 182.

³ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 182.

⁴ “Sing the Bible” refers to one biblical element for public Christian worship in a fivefold liturgical model promoted by J. Ligon Duncan III, “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2003), 65.

⁵ In many cultures and languages, identifying a legitimate song is neither easy nor obvious; it is more a progression or “matter of degree”—to borrow an idea

¹ For more on the association of worship with music, see Jonathan Ottoway, Adam Perez, and Lester Ruth, eds., *How Worship Became Music: A Historical Sourcebook* (Abingdon, 2026).

methods from biblical studies (including exegesis), as substantive interaction with biblical texts is needed for a clearer understanding of the mechanics of congregational song. Third, relevant studies must look beyond just the *evidence for* congregational song and consider the function or purpose of congregational singing in ecclesial life.

A survey of relevant literature reveals a number of noteworthy Protestant perspectives on the theological functions of congregational song. In *The Lord's Song*, John Kleinig offers a highly-technical analysis of Israel's music and worship, seeking to specify "the ritual function and theological significance of sacred song within the sacrificial ritual as described in Chronicles."⁶ Though limited almost exclusively to choral music in Chronicles, Kleinig's study delineates five functions for song in Israel's worship: (1) proclamation of God's name and deeds; (2) presenting prayer or petitions to the Lord; (3) prophecy; (4) praise to God; and (5) a "martial significance of praise," related to military exercises and "supernatural warfare against the Lord's enemies."⁷

Steven Guthrie supplies a substantial theological analysis of music and song in "Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit."⁸ In this article, Guthrie aims to justify the liturgical practice of singing with sufficient theological reasoning. To do so, he appeals to insights from Augustine, Calvin, and Bonhoeffer before commencing an exegetical study of Ephesians 5:19 and its surrounding context. Guthrie carefully argues that singing in

from Vern Poythress, "Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody, II," *WTJ* 37.2 (1975): 226. In the English language (atonal, Western), song may be relatively easy to recognize. But it is vital for Western Christians today to understand that the boundary lines for what constitutes a song are not always clear and require further definition. At its most basic level, vocal song involves a melodic cadence, a text, and the human voice. The use of the phrase "melodic cadence" here is intentional, in order to provide a definition of song broad enough to include chants and poetry. It must be noted that the songs preserved in the Bible are devoid of melodic notation, other than poetic elements and musical superscriptions.

⁶ John W. Kleinig, *The Lord's Song: The Basis, Function and Significance of Choral Music in Chronicles*, JSOT Supplement Series 156 (JSOT Press, 1993), 7.

⁷ Kleinig, *The Lord's Song*, 133–90. It must be noted that Kleinig also distinguishes between vertical and horizontal dimensions of song in worship (pp. 145–47). Yet, he considers both aspects as part of the proclamation function for choral song in Chronicles and not additional functions to add to an itemized list.

⁸ Steven R. Guthrie, "Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit," *JETS* 46.4 (2003): 633–46. For his book-length investigation of similar themes, see Steven R. Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Baker Academic, 2011).

Ephesians "is used in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit."⁹ Underneath this idea, Guthrie also observes at least three other functions of singing: (1) singing "enlists" and aligns the body and the senses in a holistic expression of praise to God; (2) singing cultivates an awareness beyond the individual self, as it requires "sensing and responding to others and one's environment"; and (3) singing "offers a powerful aural image of life together" in Christ, a particular type of unity that preserves and enhances "individual distinctiveness" in the church.¹⁰

The contributions from Kleinig and Guthrie are by no means the only studies on the topic. Though his primary interests pertain to spiritual formation through Contemporary Worship Music, David Lemley acknowledges at least five functions for singing in worship, with reference to three key passages in the NT (1 Cor 14:12–17, Eph 5:8–20, and Col 3:12–17).¹¹ Donald Hustad uses five categories to explore the functionality of music, explaining both how music operates in the Christian life and how to select church music appropriate for God's purposes.¹² Paul Westermeyer synthesizes biblical texts and historical sources to support at least four functions of music in worship.¹³ The functions of music and song are addressed in manuals for worship ministers, including Constance Cherry's

⁹ Guthrie, "Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit," 646.

¹⁰ Guthrie, "Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit," 646.

¹¹ David Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing: Formation through Contemporary Worship Music*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Eerdmans, 2021), 43–45. The complexity of Lemley's multifaceted study results, at times, in overlapping themes and functions for song in worship. Nevertheless, the following functions may be discerned: (1) singing is evidence of a relationship to God in Christ, (2) singing is an offering of praise, (3) singing is a ministry to one another in the body, (4) singing is an expression of unity in the body of Christ, and (5) singing "energizes the witness of the church" to live a lifestyle of worship to God (p. 45).

¹² Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal* (Hope Publishing Company, 1993), 22. For Hustad, good church music is appropriate church music, and appropriate church music is what "serves the purposes of God in the church, especially in *leitourgia* (worship), *kerygma* (proclamation of the gospel), *didache* (Christian education), *diakonia* (pastoral care), and *koinonia* (fellowship)" (p. 23).

¹³ Paul Westermeyer, "The Functions of Music in Worship," in *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship: Book One*, ed. Robert E. Webber, vol. 4 of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Star Song, 1994), 99–103. For Westermeyer, music facilitates praise, expresses prayer, proclaims God's Word, and recounts the story of God (pp. 99–100). Westermeyer also lists a fifth "function"—that song is a gift to be stewarded and celebrated in worship.

*The Music Architect*¹⁴ and Bob Kauflin's *Worship Matters*.¹⁵ The topic also appears in popular-level volumes written to encourage singing in a broad Christian audience, such as Jim Thompson's *Sing Loud, Die Happy*¹⁶ and *Sing!* by Keith and Kristyn Getty.¹⁷

Though all such studies advance the conversation, more development is needed. Kleinig's study is limited to OT material. Other studies lack sufficient interaction with biblical texts. The taxonomies of musical functions in the examples listed above are relatively short, rarely reaching more than four or five functions. Furthermore, some studies expand beyond congregational singing to consider sacred music in general or singing in all of life. What remains to be constructed is a focused and comprehensive theology of congregational singing that examines the ontology and function of song, according to Scripture. Thus, the present study addresses a lacuna in scholarly literature by offering a cogent biblical theology of congregational song, answering the question, "What does congregational singing do for the people of God?"

One Biblical Theology, Ten Theological Functions

The present article seeks to advance the study of congregational song by constructing a biblical theology of congregational singing with ten parts. To some degree, all discussions of Christian worship emerge from

¹⁴ Constance M. Cherry describes church music as "multifunctional," before proceeding to delineate three functions for church music: "[1] music accompanies the actions of worship, [2] music accommodates the dialogue of worship, and [3] music accomplishes the communal ministry of worship" (*The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshipers in Song* [Baker Academic, 2016], 41). Regarding the way that music accompanies the actions of worship, Cherry notes that music facilitates sung proclamation, sung praise, sung prayer, and sung exhortation (pp. 42–50).

¹⁵ Bob Kauflin proposes four reasons for music in worship: (1) music expresses emotion, (2) music reflects God's glory and activity, (3) music helps God's people remember, and (4) music expresses the church's "unity in the gospel" (*Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* [Crossway, 2008], 98–99).

¹⁶ Jim Thompson recognizes distinct vertical and horizontal functions of congregational singing, but he only addresses the topic briefly and intermittently (*Sing Loud, Die Happy: An Exploration of How God's Gift of Song Is Meant to Change Us* [Wipf and Stock, 2022], 52–54).

¹⁷ Keith and Kristyn Getty offer four functions of singing in the Christian life: (1) "singing take's Sunday's truths into Monday," (2) "singing sustains you in every season of life," (3) "singing reminds you of what God has done in your life," and (4) "singing keeps your mind on eternity" (*Sing! How Worship Transforms Your Life, Family, and Church* [B&H, 2017], 38–50).

a desire to practice what could be called "biblical worship," as the Word of God is integral to all truly Christian worship.¹⁸ This study seeks to identify themes, patterns, and connections between OT and NT passages in order to codify a list of theological functions for congregational singing in Christian worship.

Support for theological functions of congregational singing could arise from a variety of biblical texts spanning both the OT and the New Testament. This study begins with an exegetical analysis of Ezra 3:10–13 as a paradigmatic example of congregational singing in the Bible.¹⁹ While theological functions of congregational singing could be sufficiently argued with isolated verses from various biblical passages, the examination of one biblical episode showcases how many theological functions operate simultaneously in a singular expression of musical worship. Thus, what follows are not ten independent principles but ten aspects of a holistic action—a deeply corporate activity contingent upon the cooperative participation of individual worshipers. Then, within each function, additional biblical passages will be cited to provide complementary support in order to demonstrate the cohesiveness of each theme throughout Scripture.²⁰

The selected verses of Ezra 3 gain additional significance against the

¹⁸ However, though most uses of biblical worship seek to engage Christian Scripture, not all uses of biblical worship (a) refer to the same topic or (b) employ the same methods. To this end, Mike Farley supplies a seminal taxonomy for understanding common approaches to "biblical worship" in "What Is 'Biblical' Worship? Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship," *JETS* 51.3 (2008): 591–613. Hermeneutically, the present study will proceed using what Farley defines as a biblical-typological approach.

¹⁹ Critics might contest the selection of this passage as paradigmatic on two levels. First, some might dispute that this passage does not explicitly pertain to singing, whereas the primary musical verb **אָנָה** (*'anab*) in v. 11 commonly means to answer or respond. The implication is that not everyone may have sung each note at exactly the same time. Second, it is unclear precisely who participated in the singing of v. 11. While it seems clear that all the people *shouted praise* to God (v. 11b), perhaps only the priests and the Levites carried out the song of v. 11a. Even with the ambiguity of such points, this episode is clearly an example of congregational worship. All of Israel was present (Ezra 3:1). And the inclusion of musical instruments like trumpets and cymbals evokes the idea that this episode featured (a) music, (b) congregational worship, and (c) some form of congregational singing—even if all individuals in attendance may not have sung every note concurrently.

²⁰ It must be noted that not every passage in consideration speaks directly to corporate worship. Nevertheless, every example aids a biblical understanding of singing, which can therefore be appropriated and applied to gathered worship.

surrounding context of the episode. The Israelites were in exile. God stirred the Persian king Cyrus to send the people of Israel back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1–3). So, the exiles left Babylon and returned to their land. After establishing themselves near Jerusalem, the priests rebuilt the altar of God and offered sacrifices on it (Ezra 3:2–3). But the foundation of the temple had not yet been laid until the second year. Zerubbabel and Jeshua appointed the Levites to supervise the rebuilding work of the temple (Ezra 3:8), leading to the climactic events of Ezra 3:10–13:

And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD,

“For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.²¹

From the selected passage in Ezra 3, ten theological functions of congregational song can be seen largely in the following order: (1) doxological, (2) ethnic, (3) genealogical, (4) eschatological, (5) prophetic, (6) ecclesiological, (7) didactic, (8) empathetic, (9) evangelistic, and (10) petitionary.

1. The Doxological Function

First, congregational singing is doxological. The name for this category derives from the Greek verb *δοξάζω*, meaning to praise or glorify. In Ezra 3, the people cry out in doxological praise and thanksgiving to God. The Hebrew verb *הלל* (*halal*) appears three times in this brief section: once in v. 10 and twice in v. 11. It is quite appropriate that a verb for praising God occurs so frequently in the target passage, as the English term “praise” constitutes perhaps the most common popular perception of singing—a vertical expression of praise and thanksgiving to God.

²¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Many Psalms serve as examples of this doxological function in the Old Testament, such as Ps 95.²² In general, the Psalms have been sung as a part of Jewish and Christian worship for generations.²³ In the English translations of the Psalms, words for “sing” and “praise” appear together overtly in at least thirty-one verses.²⁴ Many of these examples translate a single Hebrew verb *זמר* (*zamar*) which encompasses music-making, “a song accompanied by instruments,” and even “calls to praise in communal hymns.”²⁵ Another common technique among the Psalm writers connects the verb *הלל* (*halal*, often translated “praise”) with the verb *שיר* (*shir*, *shur*, often translated “sing”).

The NT includes ample evidence for similar constructs. Hebrews 2:12 extends the discussion of Hebrew verbs in the Psalms, given the relationship of Heb 2:12 to Ps 22:22 as explained by Ron Man.²⁶ A second NT

²² This Psalm employs many of the verbs listed in this section, as it encourages the people of Israel to sing to the Lord (v. 1), to bring thanksgiving to him (v. 2a), and to make a joyful noise with songs of praise (v. 2b). Yet, such praise is not omnidirectional or without a source. God is the source and object of praise, as identified in the subsequent verse: “For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods” (Ps 95:3). Undoubtedly, the people of God are urged to sing praises to him for who he is, in an individual prescription. John Goldingay successfully highlights the vertical dimension of praise in Ps 95, linking the worshiper as the subject to God as the object of worship (*Psalms*, vol. 3, *Psalms 90–150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms [Baker Academic, 2008], 99).

²³ According to Sigmund Mowinckel, “That the Psalter was being used as a song-book for the temple service is seen not only from [some] headings ... but also from a great many technical terms in the headings and elsewhere, which without a doubt refer to the liturgical use of the Psalms” (*The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas [Eerdmans, 2004], 202). For a thorough survey of Jewish and Christian reception of the Psalms, see Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, 3 vols., Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008–2021). See also Terry L. Johnson, “The History of Psalm Singing in the Christian Church,” in *Sing a New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Anthony T. Selvaggio (Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 17–52.

²⁴ Ps 7:17; 9:2, 11; 18:49; 21:13; 30:4; 47:6–7; 57:9; 59:17; 61:8; 66:2, 4; 68:4, 32; 71:22–23; 75:9; 84:4; 92:1; 98:4–5; 104:33; 105:2; 106:12; 108:3; 135:3; 138:1; 146:2; 147:1; 149:1.

²⁵ Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Baker Academic, 2014), 225.

²⁶ As Ron Man explains, “The immediate reason for the writer of Hebrews

example, this time in narrative form, arises in Acts 16:25. Paul and Silas, imprisoned, are “praying and singing hymns *to God*” (θεόν). The direction affirms that one purpose of singing lies in expressing praise and thanksgiving, vertically, to God.

2. The Ethnic Function

Second, congregational singing is ethnic, in that it can express the identity of a particular people group or ἔθνος. The song utilized in Ezra 3 erupts from an ethnic heritage of Jewish songs and worship forms. In particular, the language of v. 10 describes the cultic rituals characteristic of the Jewish people—the temple belongs to Yahweh, the leaders are priests and Levites, and they praise “according to the directions of David king of Israel.” In the most general sense, the ethnic function of song affirms that worship is expressed in particular forms associated with cultural and ethnic identities. Furthermore, the lack of biblical content prescribing specific musical styles communicates the importance of creating songs in relation to ethnic preferences, as well as the ubiquity of singing in every culture.

The OT affirms the plurality of cultural forms and styles in other passages, as evidenced by Ps 67:4. In Ps 67, the nations (plural) will sing for joy, most likely in indigenous—not homogenous—expressions of musical worship. Jesus endorsed and employed specific ethnic expressions of music. He concludes a celebration of the Passover, a *Jewish* holy day, with a *Jewish* song (cf. Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26).²⁷ This ethnic function of singing

to quote Psalm 22:22 ... is to demonstrate Christ’s solidarity with us, His brethren (Heb 2:11–13). It is only natural that we should follow our ‘forerunner’ (6:20) and the ‘author and perfecter of [our] faith’ (12:2) as He *praises* the Father” (*Proclamation and Praise: Hebrews 2:12 and the Christology of Worship* [Wipf and Stock, 2007], 31, emphasis added). Man also notes, “The priesthood of Christ is a major theme in Hebrews; and one crucial activity of a priest is *leading the people in worship*” (p. 32, emphasis original). The worship described by Man and embodied by Christ is none other than the doxological glorification of God the Father.

²⁷ The verb is a participial form of ὑμνέω. The significance of this point is captured by D. A. Carson who notes, “The ‘hymn’ normally sung was the last part of the *Hallel* (Pss 114–18 or 115–18). It was sung antiphonally. Jesus as the leader would sing the lines and his followers would respond with ‘Hallelujah!’” (“Matthew,” *Matthew and Mark*, EBC 9, red. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland [Zondervan, 2010], 604). As an aside, ὑμνέω is the same verb utilized in Heb 2:12. Some scholars like R. T. France highlight the distinction between this Jewish practice and modern singing—that what transpires in Matt 26:30 would sound like “a strange, loud and raucous noise” to twenty-first century Westerners (*The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Eerdmans, 2007], 996). Nevertheless, in the cultural context, this pericope is very much an example of singing.

bears significance for ancillary discussions of contextualization and missiology, but the point remains—the Bible affirms that singing embodies and expresses ethnic and cultural identities.

3. The Genealogical Function

Third, congregational singing is genealogical. This label relates to the Greek word for generation (γενεά). In Ezra 3:10, musical praise commences “according to the directions of David king of Israel.” The exiles return to Jerusalem centuries after David’s death, yet Israel remembers his instructions for gathered worship and connects their congregational song to the tradition identified with King David of Israel.

One may also locate this genealogical function in the lyrical content of the Psalms. For example, Ps 145 states: “One generation shall commend your works to another ... and shall *sing aloud* of your righteousness” (Ps 145:4a, 7b, emphasis added). In the New Testament, the temporal element of the genealogical function arises in the Magnificat, Mary’s Song recorded in Luke 1: “For behold, from now on *all generations* will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him *from generation to generation*” (Luke 1:48b–50, emphasis added).

In such examples, songs—like genealogies—can connect present worshipers with the historical past. This function emphasizes that every phenomenon of Christian congregational singing is tied to a rich musical tradition that spans generations.²⁸ The musical expressions of the present do not occur in isolation. Rather, by singing, Christians take part in a historic practice with continuity among God’s people for generations, through the Bible and in the witness of Christian history.

4. The Eschatological Function

Fourth, congregational singing is eschatological, rooted in ἔσχατος and associated with discussions of eschatology. In the eschatological sense, songs can provide Christians with a future-forward orientation, directing the people of God toward an eternity of worship in Christ. In Ezra 3, the eschatological function of song is most visible in the lyrical content that points forward specifically to a future hope ultimately fulfilled in the eternal reign of Christ. Ezra 3:11 alludes to this function by proclaiming an eternal dimension to God’s love as enduring forever (עולם, *olam*).

²⁸ This genealogical point is for all Christians, not just some traditions such as Protestants or evangelicals. Even the Catholic Church views the “musical tradition of the universal Church [to be] a treasure of inestimable value, greater than that of any other art” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications from the Editio Typica*, 2nd ed. [Doubleday, 1995], 326 [§1156]).

Ezra 3 is not the only instance of this function. Jonah offers up a prayer to God with poetic (and melodic?) cadence from the belly of the great fish in Jonah 2. He expresses an eschatological dimension in Jonah 2:4: “yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.” Embedded in this prayer is an overt statement of hope in a future witness of the presence and glory of God, of something that will inevitably come to pass. In the New Testament, the most obvious examples arrive in the songs of Revelation, which capture the enduring reign of God’s kingdom in melodic cadence.²⁹ Another NT example is the reference to Christ’s eternal reign in 2 Tim 2:11–13. Though this property of congregational song is similar to the didactic function to come, the eschatological function warrants a separate categorization for the way such truths instill an orthodox expectation and anticipation in the body of Christ.³⁰

Yet, congregational songs fulfill the eschatological function in a second way that expands beyond an eternal orientation in the lyrical content. Every congregational song is a typological device, made possible by the doctrine of union with Christ.³¹ Singing songs on earth here and now demonstrates the eschatological function by training Christian hearts and minds to long for the future events to come in the eternal reign of Christ, which includes gathered singing in worship to him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb (Rev 5:13). Such a theology of the future relegates an other-worldly-ness to song, where every song becomes an anthem to the Christian that this world is not home (Phil 3:20–21; 1 Pet 2:11). On

²⁹ For a more extensive treatment of music and worship in Revelation, see Robert S. Smith, “Songs of the Seer: The Purpose of Revelation’s Hymns,” *Themelios* 43.2 (July 2018): 193–204.

³⁰ Proper expectation and consideration of the future is essential to the Christian life. For more on such topics, see Jeremy Begbie, “The Future: Looking to the Future: A Hopeful Subversion,” in *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Baker, 2010), 165–85. Begbie observes the writers of the NT “move from the future to the present,” thereby challenging prevalent cultural perspectives that start with present action and move toward future possibilities (p. 166). Thus, the eschatological function of congregational song teaches Christians to anticipate an imminent future reality, which then bears direct application to one’s present existence. Contrast this with the didactic function, which bolsters a stronger sense of faith or belief in divine realities.

³¹ Although much more can be said on this point, see Poythress who remarks, “Christ is the leader, the model, and the motivator of New Testament congregational singing” (“Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody, II,” 218). See also the discussions of the present and active ministry of the resurrected Christ as song leader and worship leader in David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (InterVarsity Press, 1992), 228; and Man, *Proclamation and Praise*, xi, 17–37, 74–81.

this theme of congregational song as an eschatological typological device, one cannot escape the relevance of the prominent evidence of songs in the book of Revelation (e.g., Rev 4:8, 11; 5:9–10, 12–13; 7:10–12).

5. The Prophetic Function

Fifth, congregational singing is prophetic, but this label is more implicit compared with the other functions illustrated in Ezra 3:10–13. In Ezra 3, the physical proximity of the gathered people presented a clear horizontal function of congregational song. As Israel sang of God’s goodness and love (v. 11), they edified one another with these truths. It is a horizontal ministry through song to others who are present.

A proper recognition of the Hebrew verb for “sing” in v. 11 (עָנָה, *anah*) bolsters this point. The term commonly means to answer or respond, heightening the horizontal aspect. It seems likely that God’s people offered alternating, responsorial statements of praise to God. The call and response nature of this event renders two additional observations. First, those present would have heard the words sung by those around them. Second, the waiting required by the call and response cadence would have augmented their ability to hear the words sung by the opposite group, as well.

Having established a horizontal function for congregational song, the next step is to support the label of this function as “prophetic.” Prophecy in both the OT (נָבִיא) and NT (προφητεία), demonstrates a wide semantic range, rendering the action itself quite mysterious. One reason why prophecy remains so difficult to understand is the frequent overlap with other spiritual gifts and liturgical actions, such as singing.³² A proper inquiry into the biblical nature of prophecy—much less an assessment of modern appropriations—expands beyond the scope of this essay.³³ However, in a general sense, prophecy involves a sensitivity to the Spirit of God in proclaiming the Word of God to the people of God. In prophetic activity, God uses humans to impart his words to the lives of other humans. This general understanding of prophecy matches the horizontal

³² Allen P. Ross agrees that though prophet (נָבִיא) “has a very wide usage; ... ‘prophecy’ and ‘singing’ were at times used interchangeably (1 Chron. 25:1–6)... In fact, it was generally understood that poetry was more inspired than ordinary communication and therefore natural to prophetic speech” (*Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* [Kregel, 2006], 215–16).

³³ Kleinig proposes at least four possible interpretations of song as prophecy in the worship of Israel (*The Lord’s Song*, 154–56). For a charitable interaction between two positions in the church today, see also Andrew Wilson and Thomas R. Schreiner, “The Continuation of the Charismata [with responses],” *Themelios* 44.1 (April 2019): 16–40.

function of congregational song. When Christians sing horizontally *to one another*, the Spirit of God can apply the Word of God through the voice of one Christian to the ears of another, ultimately leading to edification within the body.³⁴

Additional biblical evidence corroborates a relationship between music and prophecy—at a general level—in the edification of God’s people. Consider the example of Miriam the prophetess (נְבִיאָה, *neviah*) leading a song in Exod 15:20–21.³⁵ First Chronicles 25 also illustrates the connection between music and prophecy, as David identified gifted Levites capable of ministering *through prophecy* (נָבֵא) “with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals” (v. 1, emphasis added). And 1 Chr 25:6 reveals this prophetic action as involving praise (יָדָה) and thanksgiving (הִלֵּל) again *with* musical instruments.³⁶

Paul’s instructions to the Ephesians and the Corinthians serve as appropriate NT examples. In Eph 5:19–20, the prophetic function of congregational³⁷ song arises (1) in Christians singing *to one another* and (2) in the power of the Holy Spirit, as vv. 19–20 rest on the prerequisite of being filled with the Spirit (v. 18).³⁸ The ensuing fruit of this prophetic function of singing is edification, a conclusion also supported by Paul’s explanation

³⁴ Biblical texts to examine in support of this idea include 1 Chr 25, 1 Cor 12–14, Eph 5, and Col 3.

³⁵ Ross affirms the prophetic nature of Miriam’s song: “Yet, because the roles of the prophet and the musician often overlapped, . . . the song that Moses and Miriam sang may very well have been a prophetic work, inspired by God” (*Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 162).

³⁶ On the connection between music and prophecy in the OT period, Ross remarks, “In the Old Testament, singing or rhythmic chanting was considered the most powerful form that prophecy could have and a form of prophecy itself. Thus, when the Chronicler used the verb ‘prophesy’ for the work of temple singers, he was signifying that their singing, and especially what they were singing, was due to prophetic inspiration” (*Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 258).

³⁷ For those who might question the application of Eph 5:19–20 as intended for corporate worship, commentator Frank Thielman describes the target verses as a “brief treatment of the kind of corporate worship that results from being filled in the Spirit” (*Ephesians*, BECNT [Baker Academic, 2010], 353–54).

³⁸ As Thielman explains: “One result of being filled with the Spirit is speaking to one another in the form of [psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs] . . . All three kinds of singing are forms of ‘speaking’ to one another within the worshipping community” (*Ephesians*, 361).

of worship and prophecy to the Corinthians.³⁹ Paul contends to the Corinthians that individual expressions of worship are indeed valid, but cultic activity is, in part, an expression of edification and love for one another in the body of Christ.⁴⁰

6. The Ecclesiological Function

Sixth, congregational singing is ecclesiological. From ἐκκλησία meaning assembly, congregation, or “called out ones,” the ecclesiological function of congregational song is an expression of unity and solidarity in the people of God and the body of Christ. Vern Poythress explains how congregational song can facilitate a united expression for any people, as he comments, “one of the obvious reasons for using singing is that the rhythm allows a large number of people to keep their voices together, while the fixity of the words of the song allows them to say the same thing at the same time.”⁴¹ Congregational singing is thereby a tool that enables individuals to respond together as one, and this function affords any church body the opportunity to express unity and solidarity through song.

In Ezra 3:11b, *all* (כָּל, *kol*) the people shout, praising (הִלֵּל, *halal*) Yahweh. But the description of “all” applies most directly to the shouting of the people in praise—not necessarily the responsorial song of v. 11a. Though the text appears to imply that the priests and Levites supply the musical praise song while the people offer up a united shout of thanksgiving, it does not eliminate the possibility that the people’s shout or praise may have held some kind of melodic cadence. Not enough is known about this episode to argue for or against the whole congregation fully participating together in united melody at the same time.

The textual evidence features the presence and expressiveness of the whole congregation—“all the people” of Ezra 3:11. Whether or not all Israel sang the lyrics of Ezra 3:11a, at least some groups are singing together, and all of Israel is responding to God in a musical moment. Said simply, song facilitated a united response then, and congregational song still facilitates united responses today. The text emphasizes the unity of

³⁹ Among the myriad of issues and themes in 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses matters of worship in particular in 1 Cor 11–14. Speaking to the context of 1 Cor 12–14, D. A. Carson explains, “the dominant focus of these chapters is the conduct of the church as it is assembled together” (*Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* [Baker, 1987], 19).

⁴⁰ Anthony Thiselton affirms that 1 Cor 14 speaks primarily to edification and order in gathered worship (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC [Eerdmans, 2000], 1074–75).

⁴¹ Poythress, “Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody, II,” 225.

song, not necessarily whether this singular episode truly engages each individual present in an identical manner.

A similar example occurs in 2 Chr 5:11–14, where the musicians and singers worshiped *in unison* (כִּאֶחָד, *ke'echad* could be translated “as one”). The context of 2 Chr 5 reveals who was involved in this ceremony: “all the heads of the tribes” (v. 2), “all the men of Israel” (v. 3), “all the elders of Israel” (v. 4), and “all the congregation of Israel ... were before the ark, sacrificing” (v. 6). The image of gathered worship in 2 Chr 5 illustrates that all of God’s people are gathered together, and the musical leaders guided them in responding as one. The episode here in 2 Chr 5 is similar to the gathering of God’s people in Ezra 3:1, where “the people gathered as one man.”

The message of unity and oneness is taken up again in Rom 15. Though Paul discusses oneness without any direct musical application, Paul employs worship words and imagery in Rom 15:6–9 that support the ecclesiological function of singing. Paul called the Romans to worship (i.e., δοξάζω, “to glorify”) as a body with one voice. The clear point of Rom 15:5–6, explains Douglas Moo, is: “Only when the Roman community is united, only when the Christians in Rome can act ‘with one accord’ and speak ‘with one voice,’ will they be able to glorify God in the way that he deserves to be glorified.”⁴² Furthermore, the usage of δοξάζω in Rom 15:9a supports a plausible musical connotation, due to the textual link of Rom 15:9b to Hebrew songs in Ps 18:49 and 2 Sam 22:50.⁴³ Thus, the expression of unity and one voice in Rom 15:6 can be musical, though it is not solely limited to music.

7. The Didactic Function

Seventh, congregational singing is didactic. This categorization derives from the word διδαχή (or the “teaching”). In addition to the historical document of the same name that began circulating at the end of the first century, *didache* can be described as “the teaching about the Christian faith conveyed to new converts.”⁴⁴ In short, the didactic function asserts that

⁴² Douglas Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Eerdmans, 2018), 888.

⁴³ The words of Rom 15:9b are a song in both Ps 18:49 and 2 Sam 22:50. Although the musical expression of the Psalms is more easily recognized, the key to understanding 2 Sam 22 is in the surrounding context. This entire chapter begins with an introductory comment about the musical nature of the passage: “And David spoke to the Lord the words of this song” (2 Sam 22:1). The Hebrew verbs (ידה and זמר) are consistent in both contexts.

⁴⁴ Donald K. McKim, “*Didache*,” in *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Westminster John Knox, 1996), 77.

songs instruct the singer.⁴⁵ Poythress considers singing to be a type of “teaching,” and structures his article to support this concept.⁴⁶ Songs carry Christian doctrine primarily through the lyrics, and the theological and biblical content produces a remarkably formative action when utilized by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ At the most basic level, the didactic function affirms that (1) songs teach and (2) songs express the beliefs of the singer.

Returning first to Ezra 3, the content of the song in v. 11 demonstrates didactic elements through the lyrics of the people’s praise. Israel sang of God’s goodness and of his steadfast, enduring love toward his people. Not only do these truths vocalize the people’s praise, but these words are also instructing the people as they participate in the liturgical practice.

An additional OT example arises in Exod 15. All of God’s people sang (a form of שיר) a song (שירה, *siyrah*) to God, but the song follows an important statement in Exod 14:31: “Israel ... believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.”⁴⁸ What did the people believe? The content of Exod 15 demonstrates that Israel believed God to be transcendent and holy (15:1, 11, 13), powerful and strong (15:1–2, 13), the source of salvation and deliverance (15:2), both El and Yahweh (15:2–3), sovereign over the natural world (15:4–5, 8) and the nations (15:14–15), just and righteous (15:7, 9), loving (15:13), and eternal (15:18).

Just as the songs of Exod 15 communicate doctrinal content about God and his character, so do the songs and hymns of the New Testament.⁴⁹ Scholars recognize that Paul, for example, imported unoriginal material into letters for doctrinal purposes (e.g., Acts 17:28, Phil 2:5–11,

⁴⁵ The idea that songs teach at a general level seems unavoidable. But more work must be done to clarify the type and scope of teaching that occurs during congregational singing.

⁴⁶ Poythress, “Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody, II,” 225.

⁴⁷ As Ross notes, “Hymns ... do not report personal experiences but tend to be more doctrinal. So the singers and musicians [in Israel’s worship] were assigned the ministry of presenting or accompanying the various expressions of the faith of the people” (*Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 256). Like the people of Israel, song can be a primary way for Christians to express doctrinal beliefs.

⁴⁸ Because of Exod 14:31, Exod 15:1–18 should be considered an expression of faith, trust, and belief. Brevard S. Childs affirms: “The narrative account had closed with the remark that the people ‘feared Yahweh’, and ‘believed in him’ (v. 31). The content of this belief is now expressed *by the song*” (*The Book of Exodus* [Westminster John Knox, 2004], 248–49, emphasis added).

⁴⁹ The NT writers often cited early Christian hymns to communicate doctrinal truths. When discussing such material, Christians must keep in mind the chasm in meaning between hymns of today and hymns in the Scriptures.

1 Tim 3:16, Titus 1:17).⁵⁰ It is unknown to what extent such passages were actually sung as congregational songs, but such hymns seem to have corresponded to liturgical use in the early church.⁵¹ Thus, such passages from Exodus and the Pauline corpus affirm the use of creedal songs to provide theological instruction for the people of God, from even the earliest days of Judeo-Christian history.

8. The Empathetic Function

Eighth, congregational singing is empathetic. The empathetic function of congregational song is derived from the Greek *πάθος* (passion and suffering) and the cognate verb *πάσχω*. As the English word *empathy* connotes, songs can express or influence emotions.⁵² Poythress offers evidence for the empathetic function in his study of Ezra 3, as he remarks, “Yet another distinctive factor in song appears to be its heightened capacity for expressing and arousing the emotions of the singers.”⁵³

Ezra 3 showcases the empathetic function of congregational song through the weeping and shouts of joy in vv. 12–13. Although the text specifies that weeping and shouts of joy accompanied the laying of the foundation for the temple, it is unknown how closely these emotions are connected to the experience of music and song in Ezra 3. It is at least possible that music was played and songs sung while the people felt both joy and sorrow.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the hymnic qualities of Phil 2:5–11 and a survey of arguments for Pauline and non-Pauline authorship, see Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1995), 192–94. Regarding 1 Tim 3:16, scholars point out that this verse stands apart from the surrounding context in a variety of ways, most notably in the parallel structure and form of six discernible phrases. George Knight concludes: “This sixfold statement appears to be a citation of a statement of the apostolic church” (*The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC [Eerdmans, 1992], 182).

⁵¹ For example, regarding 1 Tim 3:16, Knight observes “the statement appears to be liturgical” (*The Pastoral Epistles*, 183).

⁵² See Patrick N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda, ed., *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research and Applications* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Tom Cochrane, Bernardino Fantini, and Klaus R. Scherer, eds., *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Musical Arousal, Expression, and Social Control*, Series in Affective Science (Oxford University Press, 2013); and Jeremy S. Begbie, “Faithful Feelings: Music and Emotion in Worship,” in *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology*, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Eerdmans, 2011), 323–54.

⁵³ Poythress, “Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody, II,” 225.

The Bible offers many similar examples where songs bear some relationship to the emotion of the singer.⁵⁴ Among the abundance of OT evidence, Ps 67:4 contains a clear and concise example: “Let the nations be glad and *sing* for joy” (emphasis added).⁵⁵ Note here the overt connection between singing and joy. James 5:13 provides a NT corollary. Those who experience the emotions of cheer (*εὐθυμέω*) and joy should respond with *singing* (*ψάλλω*).⁵⁶ At the very least, one may conclude that singing and emotion bear an innate connection in everyday human experience.⁵⁷ As Harold Best explains, “When all the Scripture references to music making are combined, we learn that we are to make music in every conceivable condition: joy, triumph, imprisonment, solitude, grief, peace, war, sickness, merriment, abundance, and deprivation.”⁵⁸ Such examples make clear: the Word of God encourages the musical expression of emotion as part of how God created the world to function for his glory. Singing functions as both a response to and expression of emotion.

9. The Evangelistic Function

Ninth, congregational singing is evangelistic. The name of this category originates in *εὐαγγέλιον*, the Greek word for gospel or good news. To this end, singing can be an avenue for proclaiming the good news of Jesus to those who have not heard and a means of reaching the lost with the gospel. More broadly, singing can catalyze participation in the mission

⁵⁴ Consider the range of emotions—both joy and lament—in the Psalms, or take the book of Lamentations as a whole. Overt songs (*שיר*) reference a range of emotions of great pain and joy (cf. Isa 26:16–19). Furthermore, there is the example of prayer-songs connected to emotion (cf. 1 Sam 2 and Jonah 2).

⁵⁵ The ascription describes this Psalm as a song (*שיר*), and the Psalmist expresses a desire for the nations to experience the emotions of gladness (*שמח*, *samach*, “to delight in”) and joy (*רנן*, *ranan*, “to cry out, in joy or praise”). Goldingay agrees: “Indeed, they [the peoples] are not merely confessing and realistically acknowledging how things are but rejoicing and resounding: that is, resounding with joy” (*Psalms*, vol. 2, *Psalms 42–89*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms [Baker Academic, 2006], 302).

⁵⁶ Douglas Moo clarifies here that *εὐθυμέω* “connotes a state of the emotions rather than outward circumstance,” as circumstances are the broader context of the letter (*The Letter of James*, PNTC [Eerdmans, 2000], 235).

⁵⁷ See also the statement of Jesus in Matt 11:17. Carson notes the frequency and regularity with which Jesus extracts spiritual analogies from common human activities, such as the example of musicmaking among village children in Matt 11:17 (“Matthew,” 313).

⁵⁸ Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, Through the Eyes of Faith (HarperOne, 1993), 186.

of God and serve as a means of evangelistic ministry. This function resembles the didactic function of singing, but the evangelistic function is more narrowly focused on the calling of sinners to turn from their idolatrous worship to embrace the worship of the living God.

The evangelistic function of congregational singing can be understood in at least two ways. On one level, worship through singing can itself be an evangelistic witness. Ezra 3 exemplifies this point in v. 13. The eruption of sound—joy, sorrow, and song—was heard from far away. But how did Israel recognize this? The most logical explanation is that outsiders heard the sheer volume of Israel's worship and came to seek the source. Similarly, Paul alludes to what could be described as an evangelistic function of gathered worship in 1 Cor 14:24–25, of which music is a part (cf. ψαλμός in 1 Cor 14:26). Here, Paul acknowledges the possibility of unbelievers experiencing a conviction of sin and conviction of truth through the liturgical activities of the gathering.⁵⁹ Building upon the biblical foundation established by Paul, Harold Best speaks of evangelism as “overheard worship.”⁶⁰ Best's word picture appropriately describes the *actual* scenario of Ezra 3 and the *potential* scenario of 1 Cor 14, where congregational singing might move unbelievers to follow God.

On another level, lyrical content can also communicate the message of the gospel and the urgency of the mission of God in a manner that spurs God's people to missional action. God-glorifying and gospel-centered songs can stir in the people of God a desire to reach the nations for God's glory. Many songs in the OT mention God's glory, his salvation, and his deeds (e.g., 1 Chr 16; Pss 67, 96). While initial occasions concerned Israelite worshipers, the people and nations of earth are intended to be the ultimate recipients of such proclamation. The song of Jesus in Rom 15:9 implies that Jesus is not only singing *among* the Gentiles, but *for* the Gentiles to join the people of God.⁶¹ Additionally, hearing and singing the Song of Moses in Rev 15:4, for example, engenders an aspiration and

⁵⁹ Thiselton rightly explains that the present passive verbs are key to understanding this potential evangelistic scenario in vv. 24–25: “The present passives ἐλέγχεται and ἀνακρίνεται express the heart of this verse: the person in question undergoes conviction and judgment. The Greek ἐλέγχω means *to bring to the light, to expose*, especially in classical contexts, but in the NT and often in the papyri it denotes both *conviction of sin* and *conviction of truth*, most especially in the Fourth Gospel, where the agent who brings home this conviction is Jesus Christ or the Spirit-Paraclete” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1128).

⁶⁰ Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, 203.

⁶¹ Reggie Kidd affirms this: “The early Christians' outward-boundness is a reflection of God's own heart, for Jesus came to take God's song to the nations” (*With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* [Baker, 2005], 164).

urgency for this reality to materialize.

10. The Petitionary Function

Finally, congregational singing is petitionary. This function is derived from the Greek and Hebrew words for the action of prayer that are regularly rendered “petition” in English translations (cf. הִלָּאֵה, *she'elah* in 1 Sam 1:27; חָנַן, *chanan* in Dan 6; and δέησις in Phil 4:6).⁶² Petition may be a specific type of prayer for Christians today, but the petitionary function of singing recognizes that congregational songs function as prayer in general—as direct communication with God himself.

Although prayer is not mentioned directly in the text of Ezra 3:10–13, it is not new for congregational songs to be considered expressions of prayer in an ontological sense. The most overt historical example is the influential axiom: “He who sings prays twice,” which some claim originates with Augustine.⁶³ Calvin expressed a similar view, though not as pithily.⁶⁴ In this respect, the sung lyrics of Ezra 3:11 function simultaneously as both song *and* prayer. After all, the Israelites sang to the Lord (v. 11). The orientation of their singing suggests that they considered their words to be communication with God.

At least two passages in the OT support this link between prayer and song—the prayers of Jonah (Jonah 2:1) and Hannah (1 Sam 2:1).⁶⁵ In both cases, the petitioner prays to God in the context of relative privacy, but the biblical documentation of these prayers connects prayer and music. Hannah's *prayer*, in particular, is cited by Allen Ross as “the first example

⁶² Kleinig observes that one reason for Israel's choral songs is “to present Israel's petitions to her Lord (1 Chr 16:35)” (*The Lord's Song*, 147).

⁶³ The phrase appears in a variety of locations and publications, including the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (p. 327, §1156 fn. 21). As an alternate source and translation, consider Brian Wren's work: “Whoever sings [to God, in worship], prays twice” (*Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* [Westminster John Knox Press, 2000], 1). It must be noted that some challenge the Augustinian authorship of this statement on the grounds that he said something similar, but perhaps not this concise phrase. Despite its dubious origins, the maxim effectively encapsulates the petitionary function of congregational singing.

⁶⁴ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2, The Library of Christian Classics (Westminster John Knox, 2006), 2:894–96 (3.20.31–32).

⁶⁵ As an example from the Psalms, Goldingay describes Ps 67 as a prayer (*Psalms 42–89*, 299). Thus, Ps 67 serves as further evidence of the connection between prayer and song.

of an Israelite song delivered at the sanctuary.”⁶⁶ Hannah’s words in 1 Sam 2 can be classified as song due to the overt poetic form and its inclusion in the worship of the early church.⁶⁷ Yet, in the passage itself, Hannah does not *sing*; she *prays* (לָלַחַם, *palah*) and *says* (אָמַר, *amar*) these words to God.

The relationship of prayer and song can also be seen in the New Testament. In Acts 16:25, Paul and Silas pray (προσεύχομαι) and sing hymns (ὕμνῳ) to God. Were these two separate actions or one? Even within the linguistic evidence, the answer is not entirely clear. Maybe this action was not altogether different from Hannah’s (melodic?) prayer to God. James 5:13 also functions as a strong NT example. Though the prescribed response to joy and cheer is *to sing praise* (ψάλλω), Moo explains: “Prayer is clearly the topic of this paragraph, being mentioned in every verse.”⁶⁸ The sequence certainly supports a relationship between song and prayer, as sentences containing the verb προσεύχομαι surround ψάλλω in Jas 5:13. One cannot escape the composite picture constructed from biblical evidence—verbs for prayerful petition surface in musical texts and musical features occur in texts commonly considered prayer.

Conclusion

This article constructed a robust biblical theology of congregational singing from Ezra 3:10–13 and supplemental Scriptures. While the essay offers ten theological functions of congregational singing, the list supplied in this article serves as a starting point—not an exhaustive list. At the same time, by recognizing these ten theological functions of congregational singing in Scripture, the article has advanced its central argument—that congregational singing, in the Bible, is more robust than the reductionistic approach to singing that exists in many congregations today. Indeed, congregations stand much to gain from recovering a view of congregational singing that extends beyond just musical praise to God. In addition, the explication of these ten theological functions for congregational singing prompts at least four additional reflections.

First, congregational songs are multifaceted liturgical elements that resist reductionisms. Songs are irreducibly complex. As seen in Christian Scripture, singing accomplishes multiple actions simultaneously. Even

⁶⁶ Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 253. Ross also notes here that, linguistically, the verb *pray* in 1 Sam 2:1 might refer to the preceding prayer rather than the praise that follows. Nevertheless, the association of prayer and music remains.

⁶⁷ Donald P. Hustad, “Music in the Worship of the Old Testament,” in *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship: Book One*, ed. Robert E. Webber, vol. 4 of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Star Song, 1994), 191.

⁶⁸ Moo, *The Letter of James*, 234.

songs that may appear as vertical praise to some are also teaching others, expressing emotion, and facilitating unity (among other functions). Rarely will a congregational song for Christian worship serve only one isolated function independent from the others. Churches ought to beware of reducing song functions unnecessarily and limiting the manifold benefits offered to God’s people. A bolstered theology of congregational singing offers churches and church leaders a new vocabulary for understanding the mechanics of worship. Furthermore, each function of congregational singing can also become a point to highlight for musicians, song leaders, or the congregation at large—thereby enriching worship.

Second, this study emphasizes the richness of congregational song, as opposed to other forms of Christian musicking. The present technological moment affords on-demand music for limitless occasions. One no longer needs to have developed personal musical skills in order to experience music. Yet, the present study highlights that not all music accomplishes the same functions, and the biblical-theological functions delineated here apply uniquely to congregational singing. Thus, singing along to a recording, performing songs in a concert venue, and singing as God’s gathered people each constitute separate theological discussions with separate aims. Distinguishing the different types of music allows for the recognition that not all songs are best for gathered Christian worship. Some worship songs might be more suitable for private, personal devotional use. Those entrusted with song selection and liturgical planning, ought to choose songs that facilitate the full breadth of theological functionality represented by the ten points in this study. One might evaluate the effectiveness of a particular song based on the number of functions that it embodies. For example, a song with a complicated melodic shape or wide range might actually discourage a united response. Or, some creative songs might avoid confessional, doctrinal content in the pursuit of artistic expression, resulting in diminished didactic potency. As yet another example, songs should ideally reflect the ethnic and cultural styles of the community, so homogenous songs in a culturally diverse community would also hold limited effectiveness in worship.

Third, active participation in congregational singing must be distinguished from passive reception. Yes, the gospel of grace frees the Christ-follower from the works-righteousness of singing *to please* God, but Christians who abstain from singing practically disavow the theological functions of congregational song. Those who refrain from singing practically promote the inverse of each function. As examples, a refusal to sing is akin to stating, “I refuse to give God the praise he deserves. I do not believe the lyrical content of the selected songs. I deny God’s work in the past, and I do not anticipate his work in the future. I abstain from uniting

with the body of Christ in song.” Quite clearly, many Christians would be hesitant to verbalize such thoughts. But silence or apathy in congregational singing becomes an inadvertent affirmation of such alarming theological admissions.

Lastly, proper consideration of the theological functions for congregational song should lead to renewed joy and vigor in singing. This essay provides Christians with many reasons to sing for joy and not out of obligation. Like any aspect of the Christian life, singing can become rote and rather meaningless. One remedy to the depreciation of song is continued consideration of God’s purposes for singing in the Bible. Indeed, God commands singing (cf. Ps 96:1). But the systematic approach in this study is meant to support the biblical imperatives with theological principles to aid in comprehension, appreciation, and application. Given the evidence for ten theological functions of song for the people of God, why would Christians choose to abstain from singing, sing out of legalistic obligation, casually select songs for worship, or trim songs from the liturgy? Congregational singing is a manifold witness in melodic cadence, a rich treasure for the people of God, and a gift that will continue to edify and endure throughout all eternity to the praise of God’s glorious grace. The taxonomy of ten functions in this essay presents a theological case for the wisdom of congregational singing for the continued vitality of the church, and exposure to such overt theological benefits will lead the body of Christ to a fresh appreciation of song, as well as more vigorous participation in congregational singing.

A Gathered People of the Book: A Case for Scripture Reading in Gathered Worship

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Abstract: *This essay argues that the public reading of Scripture is a biblically commanded, historically demonstrated, and theologically formative element of gathered Christian worship. This study traces the practice through the canon of Scripture and demonstrates that Scripture reading functions as a communal, formative, and divinely effective act of worship. Additionally, biblical examples are reinforced by early Christian witnesses such as the Justin's First Apology and the Apostolic Tradition, confirming the centrality of extended readings in corporate gatherings. Integrating biblical theology, historical theology, and pastoral application, the essay contends that reclaiming robust public Scripture reading strengthens ecclesial identity, fosters spiritual formation, and aligns doxological practice with evangelical theological convictions.*

Key Words: *1 Timothy 4:13, apostolic tradition, biblical theology of worship, Christian liturgy, early church worship, Evangelical worship, gathered worship, public Scripture reading, Scripture and spiritual formation*

There is no shortage of resources within the evangelical tradition that emphasize the centrality of the Scriptures for the Christian life.¹ Within the broader Evangelical movement, Southern Baptists demonstrate a strong commitment to the Bible by regularly identifying themselves as “people of the Book.”² This commitment to Scripture expresses itself in theological categories such as inerrancy and sufficiency and influences Baptist worship distinctives, such as the practice of expository preaching

in weekly gathered worship.³ However, there is a persistent irony within many evangelical worship services.

Although evangelicals emphasize the importance of the Bible, they often limit public Scripture reading to a single passage, often corresponding to the sermon text, while the broader canon remains largely unheard in weekly worship. In contrast, other Christian traditions that do not hold the same theological convictions about the Bible, such as the Roman Catholic and the Episcopal Church, frequently incorporate extensive readings from both the OT and NT as substantial elements of their worship liturgies. Matthew Emerson and Lucas Stamps reinforce this observation, stating, “This points to another irony, namely, that many evangelical churches, which place a high priority on the inspiration and inerrancy of Holy Scripture, feature far less Scripture than many in the ‘higher’ traditions, some of which have long ago abandoned belief in the full trustworthiness of the Bible.”⁴ Why is there an inconsistency between theological positions and doxological practices in evangelical churches? Emerson and Stamps offer one explanation for this problem, as they trace the influences of frontier liturgy on free church worship and comment on the inconsistency highlighted above: “There is a noticeable scarcity of Scripture readings in frontier liturgy. In many Baptist and evangelical churches, it is not uncommon for there to be only one Scripture reading during the entire service, namely, the sermon text read by the preacher.”⁵ Although essential and clearly biblical, the act of preaching does not fulfill the biblical mandate to read Scripture in gathered worship.⁶ This mandate is most clearly presented in 1 Tim 4:13 and is modeled in the worship practices found throughout the Bible. Therefore, this essay contends that the Bible provides both explicit imperatives and descriptive models that support the importance and the outcomes of faithful Bible reading in the gathered assembly.

³ This essay will not treat evangelicals and Baptists synonymously. Instead, it understands Baptist, in particular Southern Baptist, as the largest modern expression of evangelicalism.

⁴ Matthew Y. Emerson and R. Lucas Stamps, *The Baptist Vision: Faith and Practice for a Believers' Church* (B&H, 2025), 127. Although they do not explicitly cite James White, White's work in North American worship is often cited as the first source to articulate the idea of “frontier worship.” See James F. White, “The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church,” in *Christian Worship in North America, A Retrospective: 1955–95* (The Liturgical Press, 1997), 103–8.

⁵ Emerson and Stamps, *The Baptist Vision*, 127.

⁶ Block states, “Evangelicals must rediscover that the Scriptures were written to be heard; they were not written primarily to be preached” (Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* [Baker Academic, 2016], 190).

¹ Perhaps the most important work on the doctrine of the Scriptures from an evangelical perspective is the work of Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: God Who Speaks and Shows Primary Considerations*, 6 vols. (Crossway, 1999). The significance of Henry's works is connected to his importance as the most influential thinker of the early Evangelical tradition.

² This commitment is illustrated through Wayne Grudem's quip, “I am a Baptist because of the Bible” (“A Mere Christian, and a Baptist Too,” in *Why I Am a Baptist*, ed. Tom J. Nettles and Russell Moore [B&H, 2001], 201).

Some authors have sought to address this issue within the free church tradition in one of two ways. First, some take the approach of focusing on the specific methods of how to read Scripture publicly. Constance Cherry's *The Worship Architect* is one example of this approach.⁷ Second, other scholars take a more theological approach, seeking to understand the biblical practice of reading Scripture publicly. One of the best examples of this approach is Daniel Block's work in *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship*.⁸ In this text, Block gives significant attention to the role of the Scriptures throughout the canon. Both approaches are needed and aid Christian worship, but it must be conceded that without a grounding in biblical principles, practical guidance is unlikely to sustain a consistent practice of reading Scripture publicly. To this end, Ligon Duncan rightly suggests that the Bible is our guide for worship renewal: "If a renewal of Christian worship is to be undertaken, on what principle will it be founded? If we are to live and worship together *soli deo gloria*, then what shall be the basis and pattern? The only answer for the evangelical Christian is *sola scriptura*."⁹ Therefore, this essay takes the methodological approach of examining selected biblical texts as windows into the practice of publicly reading Scripture. Rather than asserting a comprehensive liturgical practice from these passages, it seeks to draw careful observations about how such readings function within the worshiping life of God's people across the canon. These biblical observations are then compared with selected worship manuals and witnesses from the early, post-apostolic Church. These witnesses specifically suggest how Scripture reading functioned as a normal element of early Christian worship. Through the integration of biblical observations with theological

⁷ Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Baker Academic, 2010), 83–101.

⁸ Block suggests four elements of worship that have been affected by reducing the amount of Scripture in corporate worship. "The diminished place of Scriptures in many evangelical churches today is reflected in (1) replacing pulpits that highlight preachers' roles as spokespersons for God with nondescript or transparent stands, to make them more visible; (2) drastically reducing or eliminating the reading of Scripture in worship; (3) replacing sustained exposition of the Scriptures with short, topical homilies; and (4) substituting hymns steeped in the language and theology of Scripture with jingles that may borrow biblical phrases but are little more than sound bites empty of biblical meaning to many who sing them" (*For the Glory of God*, 170). A second example is the work of Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Devote Yourself to the Public Reading of Scripture: The Transforming Power of the Well-Spoken Word* (Kregel Academic, 2012), 13–34. While most of Arthurs's work is pragmatic, he gives one chapter to considering the biblical evidence of reading Scripture publicly.

⁹ Ligon Duncan, *Does God Care How We Worship?* (P&R Publishing, 2020), 11.

and historical insight, this essay seeks to provide a biblically compelling foundation for reclaiming the public reading of Scripture (especially among Baptist or baptistic churches) as an essential act of corporate worship, supporting the growing health of local churches.¹⁰

Biblical Foundations for Scripture Reading in Gathered Worship

Biblical worship and Scripture reading in worship are not synonymous. Many within the evangelical worship tradition have sought to develop gathered worship practices that are deeply rooted and dependent on the Bible. Descriptors of biblical worship such as "regulative" and "normative" have shaped how churches understand the Bible's role in determining the content of biblical worship.¹¹ In both descriptors, the Bible is cited as the authoritative text. In his article on biblical worship, Michael Farley traces how different hermeneutical models lead to distinct liturgical decisions in gathered worship, each allowing the Bible to remain in authority over elements of corporate practice.¹² The value of Farley's work lies in his ability to clarify different approaches that seek to apply biblical authority in the worship service. Yet, regardless of what hermeneutical model local churches incorporate, what remains underdeveloped is the centrality of the Bible being read aloud in worship.

Cherry emphasizes the long-standing importance of the Scriptures for gathered worship and indicates a starting place for observing their use in public worship within the biblical narrative: "The written word of Scripture and its interpretation have been central to worship since the time of Moses."¹³ What follows in this section is an attempt to trace the practice of reading Scripture through OT and NT examples and imperatives. As Cherry suggests, this path begins with Moses and concludes with a final imperative from the apostle Paul.

¹⁰ Crider connects the practice of Scripture reading with the overall health of local churches, stating, "Could a connection exist between the lack of Scripture being used in worship and the fact that 80 percent of churches in America have plateaued or declined?" (Joseph R. Crider, *Scripture-Guided Worship: A Call to Pastors and Worship Leaders* [Seminary Hill Press, 2024], 27).

¹¹ In his monograph on Baptists and worship, Connell traces the influences of the regulative principle on Baptist worship (R. Scott Connell, *Baptists and Worship: Sitting Beneath the Gospel's Joyful Sound* [Pickwick, 2020], 209–24).

¹² Michael Farley, "What Is 'Biblical' Worship? Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship," *JETS* 51.3 (2008): 591–613.

¹³ Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 84.

The Beginning of Public Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 31:9–13

As the final book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy concludes the first major portion of the written Word of God.¹⁴ Block suggests, “The bulk of Deuteronomy consists of Moses’ farewell pastoral sermons delivered before the Israelites crossed the Jordan to the promised land.”¹⁵ Situated within Moses’s final exhortation to Israel, Deut 31:9–13 serves as a theological mandate that shapes Israel’s worship identity.

Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.”¹⁶

This account is the first direct OT articulation describing the practice of reading Scripture publicly as a communal responsibility, establishing a precedent to trace through the rest of the canon. As the Israelites prepare to enter the promised land without the leadership of Moses, the institutionalization of Scripture reading anchors Israel’s life and worship in the authority of the words of God. The passage connects the practice of reading Scripture publicly to Israel’s corporate relationship with God. Regarding this narrative, three specific observations clarify the process and purpose of this ancient worship practice, laying the groundwork for tracing the continuity of public Scripture reading across the biblical canon.

¹⁴ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 171. The Pentateuch contains significant passages regarding worship. Block suggests that the Decalogue is one of the most significant passages, stating, “The Decalogue is crafted as a worship document for the redeemed people of God, calling for a specific response to YHWH’s revelation of himself through the exodus.”

¹⁵ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 175. Block continues this idea, stating, “Moses’ speeches in Deuteronomy complete the revelatory process that gave the Israelites their core Scriptures. In the covenant-renewal ceremony that underlies the book, the Israelites commit themselves to the entire package: text and interpretation.”

¹⁶ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

First, a close inspection of the text reveals an emphasis on the communal scope of the reading of the Law. As Moses entrusts the written Torah to the Levitical priests, he commands that it be read aloud at the appointed time to all the assembly (Deut 31:11). Within this assembled audience are men, women, children, and even the sojourner residing within the city gates (Deut 31:12). This point stresses the importance of communicating covenant knowledge to all the people of the community, not just the religious elites. The public reading of Scripture is for everyone.

Second, the stated purpose of public reading reveals the function of this worship practice. Moses explains that the Law is to be read, so “that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God and be careful to do all the words of this law” (Deut 31:12). Hearing allows learning; learning leads to fearing the LORD; and fearing supports obedience—an ordered sequence that reflects the formative power of Scripture within the gathered worship assembly. Furthermore, the reference to children who do not know the law (Deut 31:13) demonstrates that the public reading serves as an act of intergenerational teaching, ensuring that Israel’s identity as God’s people is continually reinforced through shared exposure to the Word of God. In Peter Craigie’s classic commentary on Deuteronomy, he describes the pedagogical aim of this event: “For the older people in the covenant community, the educational value of the ceremony would lie in remembering the covenant with God and in renewed dedication to the God of the covenant.”¹⁷ Craigie contrasts this reminder with how the young would receive the reading of the Law: “The younger generation, however, would learn for the first time the full meaning of the covenant.”¹⁸ The purpose of reading the Law is, at its most basic level, one of teaching all generations.

Third, the worship context of Moses’s command demonstrates a connection between gathered worship and Scripture reading. The specific event Moses references in which public Scripture reading is to occur is the Feast of Booths in the year of release, a reference to the Sabbatical year in Deut 15:1, occurring every seven years. This fall feast was a seven-day celebration of God’s faithful provision throughout the year. It was also a time of remembering God’s faithfulness in delivering the people from Egypt, when God made them live in booths (Lev 23:33–43).¹⁹ Through the act of embedding the reading of the Law within a worship gathering marked by remembrance, celebration, and assembly, Deuteronomy

¹⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Eerdmans, 1976), 172.

¹⁸ Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 285.

¹⁹ *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2011), 249.

omy presents the public reading of Scripture as a critical element of gathered worship. The Law is proclaimed in the context of a worship celebration, reminding the people that obedience flows from knowledge of the Word of God.

Reading of the Law and Worship: Nehemiah 8:1–8

Following the example of Deut 31, Neh 8:1–8 describes a second event in which the public reading of Scripture was central. The context of Nehemiah differs significantly from the time of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. However, the text of Nehemiah supports and further clarifies the importance of public Scripture reading in gathered worship. Set within the broader narrative of post-exilic restoration, the passage depicts the people of Israel gathered to hear the Word of God read by Ezra. Through a survey of this text, several points of continuity can be discerned between this vivid description and Deut 31.

The first point of continuity is the intended gathered audience. In both descriptions, the reading of the Law is to be heard by everyone in the community. Nehemiah 8:2 lists those who participated in hearing the Law read: “So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.”²⁰ Mervin Breneman says, “The Jews became known as ‘the people of the book.’ The Old Testament emphasizes that God’s Word is to be known and used by all the people, not only the priests and leaders.”²¹ Therefore, in both Deuteronomy and Nehemiah, the entire gathered assembly listened to the Word of God read as an act of worship (Neh 8:6).

A second point of continuity concerns the purpose of reading Scripture publicly. As written in Deuteronomy, the outcome of reading Scripture publicly is that the people understand the Word of God. This aspect is also demonstrated in Nehemiah by the initiative taken by the Levites to “help the people to understand the Law” (Neh 8:7). Breneman suggests this action was necessary because the Israelites had been living in a foreign country all their lives and had probably lost some of their ability to understand the Law of God due to cultural gaps or language.²² Whatever the barrier to understanding the Law rightly, the Levites took on the responsibility of helping overcome those barriers, ensuring the people understood what was being read. This initiative implies an orientation toward

²⁰ Williamson connects the idea of “all who could understand” specifically with children (H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC [Zondervan, 1985], 165).

²¹ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Broadman Press, 1993), 281.

²² Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 281.

doing what God commands. As in Deuteronomy, the Law is read, understood, and followed.

Nehemiah’s narrative supports the account of Deuteronomy through continuity and offers greater clarity to the practice of public Scripture reading by describing the people’s response to the reading of the Law. While Ezra reads, the attentive people of Israel stand listening to the reading from early morning to midday (Neh 8:3). Once Ezra finishes, there is a threefold response of worship, which Williamson describes as follows:

Their cry of ‘Amen! Amen!’ expressed their concurrence in Ezra’s words; the raising of their hands demonstrated their sense of need and dependence, no doubt with the thought that God would meet that need through the Scripture soon to be read; and their prostration demonstrated both their worship, as stated, and humble adoration.²³

The people’s response to the reading of the Law of God is a multi-positional expression of worship that reflects agreement, thanksgiving, and humility. Additionally, it is worth noting the significant amount of Scripture read in Nehemiah. Ezra and the Levites were committed to a lengthy time of reading, and the people received the reading with joy.²⁴

The Purposes of God Through Scripture Reading: Isaiah 55:10–11

A third OT passage to consider is Isa 55:10–11. Deuteronomy 31 and Neh 8 emphasize the practice of reading the Law within the gathered community through vivid accounts of worship among the Israelites, but Isaiah 55:10–11 provides a theological explanation of the result of God’s Word being read. Isaiah begins with a metaphor, comparing the rain and snow that fall from heaven to water the earth to God’s Word sent out among people. Isaiah 55:11 states,

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

In his commentary on Isaiah, John Oswalt connects God’s Word to

²³ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 166.

²⁴ Block suggests that this must be recovered in contemporary worship today: “Evangelicals must rediscover the joy of reading and hearing Scripture together with other believers. Hearing Scripture in worship is a communal enterprise, involving full participation of those gathered, communion with the saints who have preceded us, and fellowship with those in far-off corners of the globe—wherever God’s people gather for worship” (*For the Glory of God*, 191).

the promise of salvation: “Here the reason for turning to God is the absolute dependability of his word. What God has said about the certainty of pardon being available is absolutely dependable.”²⁵ Oswalt expands upon this concept of God’s truthfulness: “But even more than that, all that God has said is reliable, whether it is about himself and his love, or about the nature of reality and the foolishness of idolatry, or about the human predicament and the necessity of repentance.”²⁶ Therefore, it is through the Word of God going out that the purposes of God are accomplished.

These verses from Isaiah inform a biblical view of the public reading of Scripture. Isaiah 55:11 references God’s Word going out from his mouth. This divine act exemplifies any instance where the Word of God is reach, which would undoubtedly include the public reading of Scripture in gathered worship. Thus, when applied to the broader context of the Old Testament’s practice of public Scripture reading, the poetic images of Isaiah demonstrate the richness of the act of reading Scripture publicly and further clarify the principle that the Word read will accomplish the purpose of God.

Synagogue Worship and the Public Reading of Scripture:

Luke 4:16–21

The OT narrative presents descriptions of the people of God experiencing the blessing of the read Scriptures in gathered worship, but these blessings cannot be determined to be a normative result of Christian worship until these ideas are followed into the New Testament. What can be confidently asserted is that the reading of Scripture was for all Israelites, public Scripture reading was part of significant worship events, and the purpose of reading publicly was to educate the people in the Law of God that they might follow it. These ideas are enriched by the principle found in Isaiah that the public reading of the Word of God enriches the worship event and accomplishes the purpose of God.

Similar to OT narratives, Luke and Acts describe Scripture reading in gathered worship. Early in Luke’s Gospel, the reader observes the practice of Scripture reading in synagogue worship, suggesting familiar worship rhythms that Jesus would have experienced throughout his youth. In Luke 4:16–21, Jesus enters into this practice and reads from the Law in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as

²⁵ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1998), 211.

²⁶ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 212.

was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovering of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke’s account describes Jesus participating in the customary practice of synagogue worship by reading from the Scriptures on the Sabbath.²⁷ Luke observes how Jesus stood to read, a practice mentioned as early as the text of Neh 8, and how Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Both elements demonstrate a continuous thread between early OT worship practices and those found in the NT synagogue. However, what is unique to Luke’s account is the identity of the reader and the revelation that emerges from his reading.

As Jesus reads from Isa 61, his public act of Scripture reading becomes inseparably linked to the revelation of messianic fulfillment. After reading the text, Jesus declares, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). This simple statement testifies to the fulfillment of God’s redemptive promises within the gathered assembly and within the act of hearing itself.²⁸ When is the Scripture fulfilled? Upon hearing the text read by Jesus. James Edwards states, “It is not fulfilled in abstraction,

²⁷ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Eerdmans, 2015), 137.

²⁸ More attention can be given to the appropriation of speech act theory to the public reading of Scripture. As one example, David Calvert interacts with the idea of how words—specifically God’s Word in the Scriptures—has the capacity to do something in the worship service. The words read, sung, prayed, and preached are not mere words but words with power to shape the worshiper (David J. Calvert, “Liturgical Speech Acts: How to Do Things with Words in Worship” [PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018]).

however, but ‘in your hearing’ (v. 21) as a prophetic call of Jesus for listening ears and responsive hearts.”²⁹ This emphasis on “hearing” stresses the importance of the auditory nature of the event. The reading of Scripture functions not merely as a recollection of prophetic hope but as a means through which that hope is realized and disclosed.

Although Luke 4:16–21 is a descriptive account of the Messiah reading Scripture in the synagogue, it also informs the act of Scripture reading in public worship today. Specifically, the scene supports the idea that Scripture reading in worship is a site of engagement with God, in which God speaks decisively through his Word and reveals his redemptive purposes to his people. Jesus’s reading of Scripture in Luke 4 is perhaps the most apparent manifestation of the promise in Isa 55: that God’s Word, when read to the listener, fulfills God’s promises. This principle supports the idea that Scripture reading is not ancillary to worship but central to it, functioning as a primary mode through which God addresses his people and reveals the fulfillment of his promises in Christ.

The New Testament Church and the Public Reading of Scripture: Acts 13:14–15

In addition to Luke’s Gospel, Acts 13:14–15 provides an important description of the continuity of Scripture reading between Jewish synagogue worship and the emerging worship life of the early Church. Block connects this worship practice to Christian worship, stating, “Since the public recitation and reading of Scripture was part of temple and synagogue worship (see Luke 4:16; Acts 13:27; 15:21; 2 Cor 3:15), it naturally became an important part of Christian worship.”³⁰ As Paul and Barnabas enter the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia on the Sabbath, Luke states, “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it’” (Acts 13:15). This brief description assumes the regular reading of Scripture in gathered worship. The Law and the Prophets are read aloud as a normative feature of worship, as evidenced by the leaders’ expectations and the fluidity shown by Paul and Barnabas in completing the task.³¹ This commitment to Scripture reading asserts a covenantal identity and reflects a canonical consciousness that situates the early Christian message within the story of Israel.

Paul proceeds to offer an exhortation to the people by connecting the read Scriptures to the gospel message of Jesus Christ. His exhortation

²⁹ Edwards, *Luke*, 137.

³⁰ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 188.

³¹ Lawrence R. Farley, *The Acts of the Apostles: Spreading the Word* (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2018), 187.

does not replace or supersede the readings but emerges organically from them, seen clearly in his use of Scripture throughout his exhortation. In this way, Paul interprets Israel’s Scriptures Christologically and narratively. Therefore, Scripture reading serves as the authoritative basis for proclaiming the gospel, ensuring continuity between God’s past redemptive acts and their fulfillment in Christ.

Reflections on the Public Reading of Scripture

Up to this point, this essay has primarily considered the example of the biblical witness as it pertains to public Scripture reading in gathered worship. Through the OIT and NT, the Bible offers examples that substantiate the public reading of Scripture as a normative rhythm in gathered worship. In addition to these narrative examples, the NT epistle of 1 Timothy provides a direct imperative to read the Scripture publicly.

In his pastoral exhortation to Timothy, Paul instructs him as follows: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13). This instruction is not presented as a novel innovation from Paul but as a foundational rhythm in gathered worship. This is the most explicit NT imperative directing the church to the public reading of Scripture in gathered worship. Arthurs emphasizes the rich tradition already established by the time Paul writes this letter to Timothy, stating, “[Paul] says, in effect, to continue the ‘millennia-deep’ tradition.”³² This rich tradition is built on the objective truth of the Scriptures. Arthurs continues, “Paul’s use of the definite article, referring to ‘the faith,’ implies that we have a fixed body of doctrine that all believers should understand and to which all should give assent.”³³ Therefore, Paul’s exhortation underscores the public reading of Scripture as a sustained and essential practice within the life of the gathered church. By calling Timothy, and ultimately the church, to devote himself to this task, Paul emphasizes the critical importance of this worship rhythm.

From Moses’s final exhortation in Deuteronomy to Paul’s pastoral mandate to Timothy, Scripture not only informs the pattern of biblical worship but also is integrated into worship through public reading. The force of the Bible’s instruction is amplified when example and imperative address the same principle; therefore, the descriptive text observed from Deuteronomy and Nehemiah, joined with Paul’s imperative, provides ample evidence that the Bible instructs the Church to read Scripture aloud publicly in gathered worship. In addition to this general principle, three specific theological points can be observed.

First, God’s Word is meant to be heard by all the people of God. The

³² Arthurs, *Devote Yourself to the Public Reading of Scripture*, 25.

³³ Arthurs, *Devote Yourself to the Public Reading of Scripture*, 25.

public reading of Scripture is intended to be communal rather than private. Education level, age, or cognitive ability are no boundaries when the Scriptures are read aloud. Such reading is for everyone because God is accessible to everyone. Second, public Scripture reading is formative, not merely informational. The biblical pattern consistently links the hearing of Scripture with moral and spiritual formation, covenant identity, and people's worship responses. Hearing the Scriptures is not only an opportunity to learn the Law of God but also an opportunity to be shaped more deeply. Third, Scripture reading is a primary mode of divine address in worship. It is the means through which God actively speaks and accomplishes his purposes when Scripture is read aloud in gathered worship. Scripture is not simply a governing text, explaining what to do and what to abstain from in life and worship; the testimony of the biblical witness is that the Scriptures are words of life to those willing to submit themselves to hearing them.

Examples of Scripture Reading in the Early Church

The Bible presents compelling reasons for churches to consider public Scripture reading as a normative worship rhythm. Additionally, a brief consideration of the practices of early Christian worship helps the Church connect the principles of the biblical text to worship practice, a role often played by church history in the life of the Church. Duncan highlights the value of allowing history to influence liturgical behavior: "Church history does not supply a normative authority for Christian worship, but it does supply a didactic authority that we would be foolish to ignore."³⁴ If Duncan's assessment of the value of church history is correct, what kind of didactic authority might be available for this essay? Was the early Church devoted to reading Scripture publicly, and if so, how was this practice adopted? To discern the answers to these questions, this essay considers two of the most significant documents of the early Church: the *Apostolic Tradition*, and Justin's *First Apology*.

The *Apostolic Tradition* is one of the oldest documents dealing with worship practices of the early church after the New Testament.³⁵ The text of this document was highly influential in the Western ecclesial tradition

³⁴ J. Ligon Duncan III, "Does God Care How We Worship?," *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2011), 60.

³⁵ Nathan Chase and Maxwell Johnson, *The Apostolic Tradition: Its Origins, Development, and Liturgical Practices* (Liturgical Press, 2025).

while documents like the *Didache* were more influential in the East.³⁶ Regarding the *Apostolic Tradition*, Paul Bradshaw argues, "Although some scholars still entertain doubts about its attribution to Hippolytus or its Roman origin, it is now universally accepted that this document is the original source of the other church orders from which it was formerly presumed to be derived."³⁷ The *Apostolic Tradition* presents a clear, explicit reference to Scripture reading in the gathered worship assembly through the appointment of a "reader." Chapter 11 states, "The reader is appointed when the bishop gives the book to him."³⁸ Bradshaw connects this role of the reader to Jewish synagogue worship, providing a direct link to the example of Jesus in Luke 4:

The function could have been exercised by different members of the congregation in turn, as was the Jewish practice, where the individual was handed the scroll from which to read—the same gesture as the bishop uses here to make the appointment.³⁹

The bishop's role in making this appointment amplifies the role of the reader and increases the importance of Scripture reading. Only four chapters later, the text addresses the catechumens who enter worship: "Those who are newly brought forward to hear the Word shall first be brought before the teachers at the house, before all the people enter. Then they will be questioned concerning the reasons that they have come forward to the faith."⁴⁰ There is an emphasis in this chapter on the people's "hearing the word" after professing and explaining their faith. This practice seems consistent with OT examples of all those within Israel hearing the Word of God read aloud to support identity as the people of God and unity with one another.

The *First Apology* (155 AD) of Justin Martyr offers the most straightforward explanation of Scripture reading in early Christian worship:

³⁶ "The *Didache* serves as a window into the life of earliest Christianity, the community's self-identity, and related problems surrounding a nascent (post-) apostolic period" (Shawn J. Wilhite, *The Didache: A Commentary* [Cascade, 2019], 78). Although the text of the *Didache* is informative, its primary value for understanding early Christian worship lies in other liturgical elements, not in how the early Church read Scripture corporately. Therefore, it is not considered a supportive document to the argument of this essay.

³⁷ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 76.

³⁸ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, ed. Alistair C. (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015), 159.

³⁹ Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition*, Hermeneia (Fortress, 2002), 74.

⁴⁰ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 170.

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gathered together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.⁴¹

Justin describes a substantial time for Scripture reading, though it would probably vary in duration from service to service. Additionally, he explains the familiar pattern of reading and explanation mentioned in texts such as Nehemiah. He also commends the practice of moral formation as a product of reading and explaining the Scriptures.

The witnesses of the *Apostolic Tradition* and Justin's *First Apology* provide a picture of how the early Church practiced the act of reading Scripture publicly. These documents, and others like them, eventually led to a more formalized reading practice. According to Chapell, "By the end of the fourth century, the dominant liturgical pattern included three readings: one from the Old Testament and two from the New—an Epistle and a Gospel."⁴² This pattern largely persisted until the Reformation, when the Church's worship underwent many liturgical changes.

The act of reading Scripture publicly in gathered worship is not an incidental feature but a central means through which God addresses and forms his gathered people. The OT describes examples of Scripture being read as a communal, formative act embedded in Israel's worship. The NT presents this practice as a developed worship element in synagogue worship and as a command within the life of the Church. The early Christian sources do not innovate beyond these biblical patterns; instead, they display continuity between early Christian worship and the patterns established in the Torah. Therefore, the testimony of church history offers precisely the didactic authority Duncan describes, not by replacing Scripture's normativity but by testifying to how the Church in the Apostolic Era incorporated regular and reverent public reading of the Word of God.

The Practice of Scripture Reading in Gathered Worship

The biblical witness and the patterns of the early Church demonstrate a commitment to the reading of Scripture, but how do churches incorporate this practice in a way that is both natural and worshipful? To answer this question, it is essential to consider public Scripture reading at two

⁴¹ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 67.

⁴² Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Baker Academic, 2009), 222.

levels: service planning and the liturgical event. Furthermore, as this essay has demonstrated, reading Scripture aloud is associated with specific outcomes: the establishment of a communal identity, the instruction of God's people, and moral and spiritual formation. The following paragraphs consider both the practice and the effects of public Scripture reading.

Service Planning and the Public Reading of Scripture

As with other elements of the worship service (e.g., corporate singing, preaching, scripted prayer), it is wise to plan public Scripture readings to ensure faithfulness to God's Word and effectiveness in gathered worship. Planning supports the seriousness of the task of reading.⁴³ Scripture readings are never neutral or simply functional elements of a service; they are acts of proclamation through which God speaks. Although numerous approaches might be considered in this essay regarding the planning of Scripture reading, three interrelated points are especially relevant.

First, the public reading of Scripture in gathered worship must be canonically and theologically informed. Rather than functioning merely as a prelude to the sermon or a proof-text for a particular theme, publicly reading Scripture is an opportunity for biblical interpretation simply through text choice and placement in the service. Therefore, great care must be taken to ensure the text is correctly considered in light of the context of the text and the placement within the service. Intentional planning resists the tendency of functional canon reduction and enables Scripture itself to do formative work in the gathered assembly. Through engagement with the diverse voices, genres, and theological themes of the Bible, corporate Scripture readings contribute to the long-term work of shaping people immersed in all the Scriptures. Lectionaries are helpful tools for churches looking to incorporate regular readings from different genres of the Bible.⁴⁴ Additionally, lectionaries also make it possible for local churches to connect with other congregations through reading the same text of Scripture.⁴⁵

⁴³ Chapell states, "Reading, no less than preaching, is an exegetical task" (*Christ-Centered Worship*, 226).

⁴⁴ One example of a lectionary that fits within the broader Christian tradition is the Revised Common Lectionary. It is available through the Vanderbilt Divinity Library. <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>.

⁴⁵ "All serious reading of the canonical text has in view the catholic horizon. It is not because the church of the past bequeathed us a *different* text from that which it inherited, but because it *shares* a text with us, that we can read in hopeful

Second, the placement of Scripture reading within the church's liturgy must be thoughtful, considering how it functions liturgically within the service.⁴⁶ These readings are acts of divine address, and their location in the service shapes their reception. A text read as a call to worship, a summons to confession, a declaration of assurance, or a sending word will be heard differently in each setting. Liturgical placement informs the dialogical nature of worship, highlighting how God speaks to his people and how the congregation responds in faith. Churches that desire to increase the amount of Scripture read publicly will find that it is easy to add a Scripture reading at the beginning of the worship service as a call to worship and a final verse of benediction at the end. Additionally, this act enables the gathered worship service to begin and end with the Word of God—a powerful liturgical dynamic.

Third, public Scripture reading must be planned with a pastoral lens, considering the congregation's needs and abilities to receive the text. This is not to suggest that only pastors are allowed to read Scripture in public worship, but that it is the responsibility of pastors to plan and organize the weekly worship of the local church. This principle supports the biblical example of reading Scripture being an act of worship for all those gathered. This pastoral lens includes evaluating the length, translation, and cumulative exposure over time. Additionally, pastors must follow the precedent found in both the Scripture and early church history of reading long portions of text without feeling the tension of expediency when the Scriptures are read. Glenn Stallsmith points to an apprehension about incorporating lengthy passages in contemporary worship services. He suggests, "One can debate the merits of having several scripture readings, but the fact is that recitation of long passages can easily break the flow for

anticipation that the insights of one generation and another will complement each other. Good interpretation catches the echo of the text as it bounces off different surfaces. So the readings of the past are a proper test of our readings, challenging us to demonstrate our care, good faith and self-abnegating attention" (Oliver O'Donovan, "The Reading Church: Scriptural Authority in Practice," *Fulcrum: Renewing the Evangelical Centre*). <https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/the-reading-church-scriptural-authority-in-practice/#:~:text=The%20authority%20of%20Scripture%20rests,away%20till%20all%20is%20fulfilled>.

⁴⁶ Calvert states, "In the context of corporate worship, reading Scripture may be a Celebrative act as it re-illocutes Expressive and Assertive illocutionary acts from the text. Reading Scripture may be a Participative act by performing an Expressive while simultaneously re-illocuting a Commissive or Directive from the text. The reader's choice of tone, emphasis, and other rhetorical and aesthetic facts may also influence the way that Scripture is illocuted. Because of the multiple addresses in the context of corporate worship, reading the phrase 'Jesus is Lord' may even function as a Re-presentative" ("Liturgical Speech Acts," 112).

which contemporary services strive."⁴⁷ Yet, this sentiment is precisely why this point of application is so important. Wise planning acknowledges that public Scripture reading shapes a congregation's biblical literacy, theological imagination, and habits of receiving God's Word. Therefore, a significant amount of time should be devoted to the reading of the Word of God.

Considering the Liturgical Act of Scripture Reading

The public reading of Scripture must also be considered at the performative level or at the level of the liturgical event. Perhaps one of the most significant disincentives to increased Scripture reading in gathered worship is the casual, haphazard approach often taken when executing these moments of worship in services. The truth is that Scripture is frequently read poorly. How can churches move toward a way of publicly reading the biblical text that would be fitting for the moment and reflect the idea of God's Word accomplishing God's purposes found in Isa 55? The reader can take five basic preparatory steps before the event to refine the practice of reading Scripture publicly. These steps are applied to the specific text of Rom 8:31–33 to illustrate each point and provide greater clarity.

First, the text chosen for gathered worship must be read in context multiple times before reading it publicly. It is probably insufficient to read only the verse or verses that will be presented publicly. The reader must read the entire chapter (and possibly the entire book) containing the verses to understand the passage's full context. This process should lead to interpretive decisions as the reader reads the passage, informed by the broader context. Additionally, the reader should internalize the passage by reading it multiple times. For the text of Rom 8:31–33, the reader should become familiar at least with the rest of Rom 8.

Second, the reader must work to understand the chosen text by studying the passage. This process is not primarily one of theological study but of elocution. The reader must know how to pronounce all the words, especially the names of people and places. Furthermore, the reader must seek theologically significant words (e.g., "kingdom," "gospel," "grace") and note words and phrases that reveal structure, such as "the next day," "while they were still speaking," and "therefore." These transitional words help the reader to follow the author's thinking.

Third, the reader should paraphrase the chosen text in his own words. This is an excellent way to help readers grasp and internalize a passage's content. This activity can be typed or handwritten, but it is most effective

⁴⁷ Glenn Stallsmith, "Spoken Flow: What Gets Said," in *Flow: The Ancient Way to Do Contemporary Worship*, ed. Lester Ruth (Abingdon, 2020), 73.

when the reader puts his own paraphrase on a page.

Fourth, the reader must prepare the chosen text. In the Bible that will be used for the Scripture reading, the reader should make notes, underline, or highlight words he wants to emphasize. He should consider writing slash marks or apostrophes where he wants to pause. He should make sure the text in his Bible is large enough to read clearly under bright stage lighting.

Fifth, the reader should practice with his prepared Bible in hand. He should read the passage aloud multiple times. The reader may want to video himself and watch his facial expressions and nonverbal communication as he listens to how the passage sounds as he reads it. If possible, he may want to practice in the place where he will read it publicly.

The above is a simple list of five basic actions readers can take to improve their Bible reading in public. There are many other ways a reader might prepare, but the most important principle is that he or she take time to prepare. Reading God's Word together is one of the most essential elements in the Church's weekly worship.

Conclusion

If the argument in this essay is persuasive and the Scripture does command and model the public reading of Scripture in the worship gathering, what might be anticipated as a result of increased devotion to this discipline? In his hermeneutical text *Eat This Book*, Eugene Peterson rightly connects spiritual formation with the Bible: "Christian spirituality is, in its entirety, rooted in and shaped by the scriptural text."⁴⁸ Therefore, one answer must be that listeners are better supported in their own spiritual formation through an exposure to the text of the Bible.⁴⁹

In his short book on public Scripture reading and public prayer, British pastor Stuart Olyott directly connects how the Bible is read with belief about what the Bible is: "What you believe about the Bible, what you really believe about the Bible, comes across in the way that you read it in public. If you read it like any other book, it is because in your heart of hearts you believe that it is like any other book."⁵⁰ Therefore, the Church must treat the planning and preparation of Scripture reading with the seriousness that reflects the belief that the Bible is the Word of God.

⁴⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Eerdmans, 2009), 15.

⁴⁹ Jim Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 65.

⁵⁰ Stuart Olyott, *Reading the Bible and Praying in Public* (Banner of Truth, 2008), 43.

If the only evidence that existed to discern what evangelicals (especially Baptists and baptistic churches) believe about the Bible was the weekly gathered worship service, what conclusions would be drawn regarding their belief and commitment to the Bible? Would evangelicals still have the reputation of being "people of the Book"? Many might retain the reputation, but for far too many churches, that label might be lost. This point does not mean that the Bible has lost its role in governing these worship services, but it warns evangelicals that their doxological practices should better align with their theological convictions. Those who hold the Bible highest must also be devoted to the public reading of Scripture.

Preach the Bible

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Abstract: *It is sometimes argued that to preach the Bible simply means to faithfully “re-say” what any given text of Scripture says, whether such speech may (in the spirit of 2 Tim 3:16) take the form of teaching, instructing, admonishing, correcting, etc. This article argues, both on biblical-terminological and theological grounds, for a much more specific understanding of what it means to preach the Bible. It is, namely, to proclaim “the word of the cross” (1 Cor 1:18)—the gospel of Jesus Christ—from any and every text of Scripture. Other Scripture-based speech is important and vital for the Christian community, but only the act by which the Holy Spirit gives Jesus through the proclamation of Jesus is what the Bible means by “preach.” Implications and applications are offered.*

Key Words: *expository, gospel, ontology of Scripture, preach, preaching, Reformation, Reformers, sermon(s), κηρύσσω*

Even if Christ were given for us and crucified a thousand times, it would all be in vain if the Word of God were absent and were not distributed and given to me with the bidding, this is for you, take what is yours.

~Martin Luther¹

What does it mean to “preach the Bible”? Perhaps we could start with our resurrected Lord: When Jesus preaches the Bible, what does he preach? Of course, the Emmaus Road was no church, and before Jesus was no pulpit. However, the significance of what is recorded in Luke 24 for preaching cannot be overstated, both because of its hermeneutical and homiletical implications, and because it propels us into the second volume of Luke-Acts, where there *is*, undeniably, a record of the first instances of Christian preaching.

“Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them

in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).² “Moses and all the Prophets” is shorthand for the entirety of the Hebrew Bible (“all the Scriptures”), corroborated by the exclamation of the two hearers who later testify, “he opened to us the Scriptures” (v. 32).³ The *content* of Jesus’s Bible-based speech is “all things concerning himself.” Its *effect* was to make the hearts of his hearers “burn within” (v. 32). Such an effect helps us realize that we are beyond the borders of mere Bible study, mere teaching. Hearts burn in the land of sermons. Jesus has preached the Bible. So when Jesus preaches the Bible, what does he preach? Well, he preaches Jesus.

When the phrase “preach the Bible” is deployed in many of our contexts, what do *we* mean? Some may argue that preaching the Bible involves merely re-saying—in proclamatory manner and through exposition and application—whatever the biblical text says in any given passage. To preach the Bible is to faithfully communicate what is directly on the page. But does faithfully re-saying whatever a Bible passage says qualify as *preaching*? I will argue that in many instances it does not. *My claim is that to preach the Bible is to engage in a specific, bounded speech-act—namely, gospel-proclamation—differentiated from other modes of Bible-based ministry (often also performed through speaking) such as admonition, teaching, exhortation, ethical instruction, and the like.* I will build this argument by working through three movements. First, aided by the discipline of worship studies I will examine the early history of Christian preaching with special attention to its Jewish origins. Second, I will briefly survey and analyze what the NT communicates when it uses the language of “preaching.” Third, I will engage the theological resources on preaching, especially from the Reformation, which bring the argument all together. I will then move into a final section which will attempt to provide tools and guidelines for this vision of preaching the Bible.

Before we embark, we might ask: Is the definition I propose above not immediately confronted by perhaps *the* classic text on preaching, 2 Tim 3:10–4:5? There the apostle encourages his young protégé that “all Scripture” is “profitable” for a variety of things, including the ministries

² All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

³ Though we will not revisit this text, I find it noteworthy that we have here in v. 32 a compact rendering of what we will argue makes a sermon *preaching*. First, it is from out of the “Scriptures” (τὰς γραφάς). Second, it is an “opening” (διανοίγω) of them to reveal Jesus. Third, it is directly received: “to us” (ἡμῖν).

¹ Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Fortress, 1958), 213.

which I above differentiated from preaching (3:16).⁴ Paul then moves into a formal and solemn “charge”⁵ (4:1) with a series of five imperatives: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort” (4:2). Two interpretive possibilities are before us. On the one hand, we could see 4:2 as offering one central imperative, “preach the word,” with the other four modifying and expanding that directive.⁶ In other words, Timothy is to preach, and he is to do so *in* a state of readiness and *by* reproving, rebuking, and exhorting. Particularly the latter three imperatives, in this view, provide preaching’s mode and content. Reproving, rebuking, and exhorting become possible ways of preaching. On the other hand, we could see Paul’s words as a series of independent but related imperatives. In this view, to “preach the word” is a distinct ministry, with the other three speech-oriented works of reproof, rebuke, and training as separate forms of Scripture-based (3:16) ministry, which function on their own but additionally serve to protect the purity and clarity of the preached word.⁷ Here, I am arguing for the latter perspective, but all views may concede that for this passage, neither grammar nor syntax necessarily closes off either interpretive possibility. Other biblical-theological arguments must be added (including especially what *ὁ λόγος* means in Paul’s thought) in order to make a claim about what this particular passage might or might not say about the form and content of preaching the Bible.

In sum, then, I am arguing that though the Bible is profitable for all the things listed in 2 Tim 3:16 and 4:2, and though ministers of the Word

⁴ Many commentators describe well the multivalent richness of the Scripture-based ministries of “teaching” (*διδασκαλία*), “reproof” (*ἐλεγμός*), “correction” (*ἐπανόρθωσις*), and “training” (*παιδεία*). Two such helpful treatments are Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Hendrickson, 1988), 279–80; and Stanley E. Porter, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Baker, 2023), 647–48. For an intriguing complement, see William D. Mounce who points out the chiasmic structure of the four ministries (*Pastoral Epistles*, WBC [Thomas Nelson, 2000], 570).

⁵ I. Howard Marshall (*The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC [T&T Clark, 1999], 798) and Philip Towner (*The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT [Eerdmans, 2006], 595) identify this as installment ceremony language—a formal “charge” (*διαμαρτύρομαι*) in the presence of a credible witness (in this case, Jesus). Mounce notes, additionally, that the aorist tense of the five imperatives gives “a serious tone appropriate for the pronouncements” (*Pastoral Epistles*, 572–73).

⁶ See Fee, who describes the first imperative as “the rubric for all the others” (284), and the final three imperatives as “related to the various aspects of his task as a proclaimer of the Word” (*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 285).

⁷ See Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 799; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 573; Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 600–602; Porter, *Pastoral Epistles*, 653–55.

should be engaging those Scripture-based, largely speech-oriented ministries, to “preach the word” (which I will identify with what it means to “preach the Bible”) is something distinct. A sermon may include teaching, admonishment, reproof, and correction, but biblically and theologically speaking, it is not “preaching the Bible” until the gospel is proclaimed and Christ is offered or given.

“Preach the Bible” in Historical Perspective

Nearly all historians distinguish between the worship practices of ancient Israel and those of Judaism, locating the evolution from the former to the latter most broadly within the time spanning from the centralization of the kingdom and cultus in Jerusalem, through the exile, and into the Second Temple period. Generally speaking, Israelite worship centered on animal sacrifice whereas Judaism centered on prayer and supplication.⁸ Emerging out of this change in worship from Israel’s sacrifice-centered orientation to Judaism’s prayer-centered orientation is a new kind of liturgical practice: the sermon.⁹ Though it is surely false to say that nothing like preaching happened in ancient Israel,¹⁰ what we now think of as a sermon finds its most direct ancestor in Jewish worship practice. Any inquiry into our own traditions as to what it means to “preach the Bible” must start here, with Jewish origins.

⁸ Jon D. Levenson states: “Judaism is the tradition of the synagogue and the yeshivah, not of the Temple, the tradition of prayer and learning rather than of sacrifice” (“From Temple to Synagogue: 1 Kings 8,” in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith*, ed. B. Halpern and Jon D. Levenson [Eisenbrauns, 1981], 165). Interestingly, Levenson identifies 1 Kgs 8:23–53 as a “pivotal text in the transition from Israelite faith to Judaism and Christianity” (p. 164).

⁹ See Gerhard von Rad, “The Levitical Sermon in 1 and 2 Chronicles,” in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. Dicken (McGraw-Hill, 1966), 279.

¹⁰ Allen Ross demonstrates that the sacrifice-centric worship of ancient Israel was filled with proclamation of the Word of God (even during the sacrificial act), such that we cannot say that proclamation of the Word “began” with the synagogue or late Levitical practice. In fact, it may be at least a slight misnomer to identify Israel with a “sacrifice-centered” cultus. Ross would remind us that, biblically speaking, the core of ancient Israel’s worship was the proclamation of the Word of God and that sacrifice itself was always joined with (in fact, was a form of) proclamation (Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* [Kregel, 2006], 142–46, 152, 173–74, 177–78). See also Levenson, “Temple,” 165. Something about this continuity reveals a close alignment between proclamation of the Word of God and a theology of sacrifice, the connection of which is creatively explored by Peter J. Leithart, *Theopolitical Liturgy* (Athanasius, 2019), 51–78.

The rise of the synagogue in the Second Temple period is perhaps the single most visible monument to this slow, multi-faceted liturgical revolution from Israel's sacrifice to Jewish prayer.¹¹ Most worship historians and biblical scholars agree that what took place in Second Temple synagogues had a profound effect on early Christian liturgical practice, particularly preaching.¹² The NT reports that many of the first Jewish believers continued to attend synagogue gatherings even after conversion.¹³ Earlier scholarship expressed confidence in what we can know about the shape and content of those gatherings, even sketching potential reconstructions of first-century synagogue liturgies.¹⁴ More recent scholarship, however, urges caution. Paul Bradshaw argues persuasively that we have far more clarity about the development and content of synagogue liturgies *after* the first century, which is often too confidently read backward into the era of the early church.¹⁵ It is more likely that first-century synagogue gatherings were far less liturgically formal. In fact, as Andrew McGowan argues, until the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, "first-century synagogues were not primarily liturgical centers; the temple was still the real hub of Jewish worship."¹⁶ Based on the NT accounts and on sources such as Josephus

¹¹ The language of "liturgical revolution" is borrowed from Peter J. Leithart, *From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution* (Canon Press, 2003).

¹² Levine argues that there were two kinds of gathering spaces for Jews in this period—the synagogue and the *proseuche*—the former being dominant in the Judean communities with the far more broad purpose as a meeting-house for many kinds of purposes beyond the religious, and the latter dominant in the diaspora communities, which seemed to have a more regularly focused "religious dimension" (Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* [Yale University Press, 2000], 128). This distinction, for my purposes, is less important to observe, and I will continue referring to "synagogue" practice as inclusive of our understanding of what happens in both spaces when the purpose of the gathering is for scriptural teaching and dialogue.

¹³ Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14–15, 42–43; 14:1; 17:1–2, 10, 17; 18:4, 7–8, 19; 19:8

¹⁴ E.g., Paul Philip Levertoff, "Synagogue Worship in the First Century," in *Liturgy and Worship: A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion*, ed. W. K. Lowther Clarke (SPCK, 1932), 60–77. For a recent re-articulation of this approach, see Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Kregel, 2006), 356–66 (noting especially 363n18).

¹⁵ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2002), 23–33.

¹⁶ Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Baker, 2014), 67.

and Philo,¹⁷ it is likely that first-century synagogue gatherings in Judea and surrounding regions resembled far more what we might stylize today as a Bible study.¹⁸ Apparently, such gatherings had no previous or contemporaneous analogue in any other religion. "By the first century, a weekly ceremony featuring the communal reading and study of holy texts had become a universal Jewish practice. It was a unique feature in the ancient world; no such form of worship was known in paganism."¹⁹

Those Scripture-centered synagogue gatherings, therefore, were not quite what we would call "worship services," but practiced in them was a form of authoritative speech. The form and content of such speaking would influence what later centuries would recognize as Christian preaching.²⁰ Evidence strongly suggests that such synagogue "preaching" was conversational, rather than "a formalized, univocal activity led by one uninterrupted orator."²¹ Still, when the "preacher" was speaking, do we know anything of what it was like?

We know with more certainty that in later centuries synagogue preaching had developed formal styles and patterns.²² Those ancient synagogue homilies may shed light on what first century Christian preaching was like, especially if we are willing to consider the scholars who see connections

¹⁷ E.g., Matt 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:16, 31–33; John 6:59. Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 16.43; *Contra Apionem* 2.175; Philo, *De somniis* 2.127; *Moses* 2.216–217; *Hypothetica* 7.13; *De Vita Contemplativa* 30–31.

¹⁸ Bradshaw writes, "It seems to have been an assembly for the primary purpose of studying a portion of the Torah on every Sabbath and festival (at which some praying might also have been done) that was a regular feature of the synagogue from the outset, and may even have constituted *the* fundamental reason for the emergence of that institution" (*Origins*, 36, emphasis original).

¹⁹ Levine, *Synagogue*, 139. See also Arnaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 90.

²⁰ According to McGowan, it is not until the fourth century when historical records visualize sermons as resembling what we know—i.e., formal orations from a single person to a non-speaking listenership in the context of a worship service comprised of formal elements (*Worship*, 62–65).

²¹ McGowan, *Worship*, 70. If such conversational practice did have an influence on the first-century church worship gatherings, it might possibly provide part of the backdrop for the Corinthian problem related to the chaos of prophecy and tongues addressed by Paul in 1 Cor 14 (McGowan, *Worship*, 74–75).

²² See William Richard Stegner, "The Ancient Jewish Synagogue Homily," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (Scholars Press, 1988), 51–70.

between Jewish preaching and certain NT texts.²³ Such Jewish homilies appear to be a combination of exposition and explanation of a text or texts, with a move toward application by way of admonishment, and potentially a Messianic conclusion. They would have interacted with several disparate but related texts of Scripture, likely assigned from some type of lectionary.²⁴

If indeed the synagogue homily shaped early Christian preaching, we can say that from the beginning Christian homiletics was influenced by traditions which took seriously the exposition, interpretation, and application of Scripture. Expository preaching as we know it today bears strong resemblance to this ancestor.²⁵ And bringing together such evidence, it seems that the landscape of Christian preaching is wide enough to include modes of speech identified earlier from 2 Timothy as teaching, training, exhorting, reproving, and rebuking. Even more, Christian history bears this out. By the time we *do* have records of formal Christian preaching, such sermons, whether by Tertullian, Origen, Chrysostom, Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome, or Augustine, contain the full spectrum of speech just noted.²⁶ At least in practice, then, early Christianity would support an understanding of what it means to preach the Bible as much wider than my proposed narrow focus on preaching as gospel-proclamation. Even so, what we will discuss below will press a question: Can all these modes of Scripture-based sermonical speech be rightly categorized as forms of “preaching the Bible” if, on the one hand, the Scriptures themselves demonstrate something more focused when they use the terminology of “preaching,” and if, on the other hand, the Bible is understood theologically as existing, to say *one thing*? The next two sections will handle each of

²³ E.g., Peder Borgen sees Jewish homiletical patterns present in the Gospel of John (*Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* [Brill, 1981]); and Gabriella Gelardini who observes considerable overlap in structure, language, and liturgical locale between the book of Hebrews and later synagogue homilies (“Hebrews, An Ancient Synagogue Homily for *Tisha Be-Av*: Its Function, Its Basis, Its Theological Interpretation,” in *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods, New Insights*, ed. Gabriella Gelardini [Brill, 2005], 107–27). Of course, my argument above rests on the conclusion that both these NT texts were written in the first century, with which I acknowledge not all agree.

²⁴ See esp. Stegner, “Homily.”

²⁵ McGowan’s admonition, however, that we should be cautious about easy anachronisms that fashion ancient preaching “in the image of modern homiletics” should be taken seriously (*Worship*, 72).

²⁶ Wendy Mayer summarizes such patristic preaching under two broad characteristics: moral and ethical teaching, and scriptural exegesis. See her “Preaching and Listening in Latin? Start Here,” in *Preaching in the Patristic Era: Sermons, Preachers, and Audiences in the Latin West*, ed. Anthony Dupont et al. (Brill, 2018), 13.

these “ifs” in turn.²⁷

“Preach the Bible” in New Testament Perspective

The previous section took us into the NT world of preaching, and though we engaged some of the scriptural data historically, we will now do so from a biblical-theological perspective. The NT does not merely record the earliest history of preaching, it also makes theological claims about what “preaching the Bible” is and is not. One could make the case that we should begin with the preaching of Jesus himself. This indeed would be tempting, given that the content of his first recorded sermon in Luke 4 appears to be nothing other than a “Christocentric” message where Jesus proclaims himself (v. 21) from the biblical text of Isaiah (vv. 18–19). Move on to other sermons, though, such as Matthew 5–7, and the hearer is hard-pressed to find any Christocentrism apart from the fact that Jesus himself is preaching the message. Strange as it sounds, we may have good reason to exclude the sermons of Jesus in developing a biblical understanding of Christian preaching. Rudolph Bultmann’s now classic argument about the Christian kerygma, though contested and compromised in many of its finer points, remains relevant to our discussion in its broad thesis:

Christian faith did not exist until there was a Christian kerygma; i.e. a kerygma proclaiming Jesus Christ—specifically Jesus Christ the Crucified and Risen one.... He was first so proclaimed in the kerygma of the earliest Church, not in the message of the historical Jesus, even though that Church frequently introduced into its account of Jesus’ message, motifs of its own proclamation.²⁸

²⁷ I acknowledge that in this section we have utterly ignored *non*-Jewish influences on early Christian preaching, such as the Greek rhetorical traditions, which certainly had an impact, both positively and negatively (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–2:5). Part of the reason for such exclusion is that we are focusing on the topic of preaching *the Bible*—engaging in speech *from* the scriptural text—which is, as we have observed, uniquely Jewish in origin. Nevertheless, the influence of the Hellenistic philosophical schools, especially on Christian preaching after the first century, is well attested (cf. Mayer, “Preaching,” 11–27).

²⁸ Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols, trans. Kendrick Grobel (Baylor University Press, [1951] 2007), 3. We should be clear that Bultmann is using the phrase, “Christian faith,” in a narrow, literal, and technical sense. As I interact with his thought, I am not saying that, theologically speaking,

In other words, the proclaimed message *about Christ* could not be faith-creating (Rom 10:17) “preaching” (κήρυγμα) until the deeds to be proclaimed—his death and resurrection—were done. Christ “the preacher must become the preached.”²⁹ This insight led Bultmann to notice in the NT the emergence of language that would be indicative of the specific character of truly *Christian* preaching. Such language orbits around two terms, κηρύσσω and εὐαγγελίζω, and their cognates.³⁰ In fact, Bultmann observes, as the Hellenistic Christian community adopts the broader culture’s terminology of εὐαγγελίζω (originally a more general term for any kind of heralded proclamation), it transforms the word into a precise and “technical term for the Christian proclamation” to the end that, in the NT writings, εὐαγγελίζω “is, in use, completely synonymous with” κηρύσσω.³¹ In other words, in the New Testament, “to preach” means “to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Let us observe this claim in action.

Κηρύσσω occurs sixty-one times in the New Testament. In the Gospels and Acts, Jesus’s own ministry is characterized as a ministry of κηρύσσω (Matt 4:17; Luke 3:3; 4:18, 19). At this point, an important distinction should be made. On the one hand, we have the pre-crucifixion “sermons” of Jesus (like those mentioned above), delivered in public and in the synagogue. On the other hand, we have what the post-resurrection Christian Gospel-writers would later recognize, through theological reflection on the revelation that is Jesus’s death and resurrection, as Jesus’s own ministry of κηρύσσω. In other words, on the other side of the resurrection, the Gospel-writers recognize more clearly what they were coming to understand earlier: Jesus is more than a Jewish rabbi; Jesus *is* the gospel’s gift, and as he himself had been present in his own acts of teaching and proclamation, κηρύσσω was taking place. So, the Gospel-writers describe, as Jesus enters the synagogues he “preaches the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14). As he commissions the disciples, he

saving faith in Jesus was not possible prior to the death and resurrection of Christ. Israelite believers were in fact drinking the same spiritual drink from the Rock of Christ (1 Cor 10:4). Rather, Bultmann is more technically asserting that Christian faith *post-resurrection* was absolutely dependent on what he understands to be the NT kerygma.

²⁹ Gerhard Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation: Dialogue with Bultmann* (Fortress, 1966), 73. Earlier, Ebeling concurs with Bultmann: “kerygma in the strict sense of the word, is christological kerygma, which the proclamation of Jesus was of course not” (p. 42).

³⁰ We could also include here καταγγέλλω, often translated “to proclaim,” with its emphasis more on public declaration. It appears eighteen times in the NT (concentrated solely in Acts and Paul), and maps very well onto what we will observe about the specificity of κηρύσσω and εὐαγγελίζω.

³¹ Bultmann, *Theology*, 87.

tells them to do the same kingdom-preaching (Matt 10:7; Acts 20:25; 28:31). Jesus’s preaching of this gospel is characterized as effecting “remission of sins” (Luke 24:47), “repentance” (Mark 6:12), “deliverance” (Luke 4:18), and “the year of the Lord” (Luke 4:19). Noticing these effects helps us to see how narrowly the term “preach” is being defined. Are sin-remission, repentance, and deliverance the effects of mere exhortation, admonition, or teaching? No, they are the effects of speech far more specific—the giving of the gospel. When one is “preached” to, one is given the Jesus who effects all these things. This makes sense, then, of the language used once the apostles themselves begin their own ministry of κηρύσσω. Their preaching is summarized as “preaching *Christ*.” Philip “preached Christ” (ἐκήρυσσεν ... τὸν Χριστόν) in Samaria (Acts 8:5). Upon conversion, Paul begins to “preach Jesus” (ἐκήρυσσεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν) in Damascus (Acts 9:20).

Outside the Gospels and Acts, when Christians begin reflecting upon “preaching,” the term continues to be used for specific speech with defined content. Of the twenty instances of κηρύσσω outside the Gospels and Acts, eighteen are found in Paul.³² In seventeen of those eighteen instances,³³ κηρύσσω most naturally fits within the narrow definition of preaching as gospel-proclamation. Significantly, the apostle concludes his most systematic epistle by placing in apposition “the gospel” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) and “preaching Jesus Christ” (τὸ κήρυγμα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ), effectively equating the two (Rom 16:25). Along these lines, Paul most commonly employs the phrase “preach Christ/Jesus”³⁴ or “preach the gospel,”³⁵ but he also uses other names for this same speech-activity. Sometimes it is preaching “the word” (2 Tim 4:2) or “the word of faith” (Rom 10:8). Other times it is summarized as preaching “Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23) or “the mystery” (1 Tim 3:16).³⁶

The importance of 2 Tim 4:2 thus far for our discussion gives us entry

³² The other two are 1 Pet 3:19, where Jesus preaches to the spirits in prison, and Rev 5:2, where the angel preaches in a loud voice. Both instances fit our narrow definition.

³³ Rom 2:21 is the single instance of Paul’s use of κηρύσσω which is clearly not some form of “preaching Christ” (but cf. 1 Pet 3:19).

³⁴ 1 Cor 1:19, 23; 15:12; 2 Cor 4:5; 11:14; Phil 1:15.

³⁵ Gal 2:2; Col 1:23; 1 Thess 2:9.

³⁶ The nine instances of the noun κήρυγμα show much of the same consistency of usage. In its three instances in the Gospels, twice it is used for the “preaching” of Jonah (Matt 12:41; Luke 11:32) and once (in some mss) refers to the “preaching of eternal salvation” of the disciples after Christ’s ascension (Mark 16:20). The remaining six instances, all from Paul’s epistles, quite clearly mean the preaching *of the gospel* (Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 1:21; 2:4; 15:14; 2 Tim 4:17; Titus 1:3).

into another term which helps us define what the NT means by preaching *the Bible* and may challenge our common parlance. Many times, when we speak of “preaching the word,” especially for those of us in the traditions of evangelicalism, we broadly mean something like, “delivering sermons from the Bible”—i.e., many kinds of authoritative speech from the Scriptures, whether teaching, admonishment, exhortation, etc. Is this what Paul means by “preach the word”? Surveying elsewhere what is often the object of the verb *κηρύσσω*—namely “the word” (ὁ λόγος)—is instructive. Earlier in 2 Tim 2:8–9, Paul had equated “the gospel” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) with “the word of God” (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ).³⁷ A few verses later, Timothy is admonished to “rightly handle the word of truth” (τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας, 2 Tim 2:15), which in context of the trustworthy saying (2:11–13) cannot mean the whole Bible broadly, but the whole Bible’s gospel specifically. In Titus 1:3, God has manifested eternal life in his “word” (τὸν λόγον) “through preaching” (ἐν κηρύγματι). In 1 Cor 2:4, Paul’s “word” (ὁ λόγος) and “preaching” (τὸ κήρυγμα) are equated with the content of “Christ and him crucified” just two verses earlier. To “preach the word,” then, is not to say just *anything* from the Bible, nor is it merely re-saying what any given scriptural passage says. Preaching the Bible, biblically speaking, is very specifically to preach *the gospel* from the Bible.³⁸

³⁷ The apostle equates the two the same way in 1 Thess 1:5–6.

³⁸ If this is the case, we might expect to see distinctions being made between *κηρύσσω* and other forms of Scripture-based speech often associated with what it means to preach the Bible. And indeed, we do. For instance, Paul distinguishes between “preaching” and “teaching” (διδασκαλία) in 1 Tim 5:17 in the ministry of the πρεσβύτεροι. Notably, the term translated as “preaching” is not κήρυγμα, but λόγος. Preaching is so associated with the “word” of the gospel that κήρυγμα and λόγος are interchangeable. The word preached from the Scriptures is something more specific than mere Christian teaching (διδασκαλία) or catechesis (κατήχησις). Do we find counter-evidence to this with Paul’s language of “the one who is *taught* the word” (ὁ κατηχούμενος τὸν λόγον) in Gal 6:6? In this instance, immediate context is less helpful because the statement appears almost as a parenthetical aside, providing an exception to the admonition which sums up his main argument in 6:5. We may have to rely on evidence elsewhere, such as when Paul calls himself on two separate occasions (1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11) both a “preacher” (κῆρυξ) and a “teacher” (διδάσκαλος) of “the gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον). We have strong reason to believe that even in Gal 6:6, “teaching the word” is yet another way of describing gospel-proclamation. In my opinion, C. H. Dodd complicates and confuses the distinction between κήρυγμα and διδασκαλία when he equates the former with missionary work only to “persons interested but not yet convinced,” and the latter with “ethical instruction,” παράκλησις, and ὁμιλία, which are to be preached “to a congregation already established in the faith” (*The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* [Hodder and Stoughton, 1951], 7).

I end this section giving special attention to Paul’s sermon in Acts 13. There, in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, “after the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it’” (Acts 13:15). This requested “word of encouragement” (λόγος παρακλήσεως³⁹) appears to be a phrase used to describe first-century synagogue homiletical activity. Paul is being asked to deliver the synagogue homily, which, given our explanation above in the previous section, might have typically included three things: (1) scriptural exposition; (2) application and admonishment (i.e., ethical teaching); and potentially (3) a Messianic conclusion. Interestingly, Paul leaves out the ethical teaching altogether, effectively removing what we most typically think of as παράκλησις from his λόγος παρακλήσεως. Instead, Paul exposit Scripture (vv. 17–22) and then offers its “Messianic conclusion,” identifying Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture (vv. 23–31).⁴⁰ However, he does not stop there. Suddenly, Paul’s sermon gives way to *preaching*. He says, boldly and directly in v. 32, “we bring you the gospel” (εὐαγγελιζόμεθα), given as a “promise,” the form of which is concretized in the climactic words of vv. 38–39: “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed (καταγγέλλεται) to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed⁴¹ by the law of Moses.”⁴²

Whether or not we have a water-tight case on the level of terminology, we should feel the force of the New Testament’s verbal weight: Bible-based sermons become “preaching” when they preach *the gospel*. I turn now, in the third section, to the resources of Christian theology both to complete my argument and to clearly define what I mean by “gospel.”

³⁹ Interestingly, Paul uses the verbal form of the same word for “encouragement” (παρακάλεισεν) in his string of five imperatives in 2 Tim 4:2, often translated as “exhort.”

⁴⁰ Of course, by “Paul” here, we mean the Paul whom Luke, the author of Acts, presents to us. No doubt the entirety of Paul’s speech was not recorded. For our purposes we are interested in the canonical form of this speech and the resulting theological vision Luke’s “Paul” offers us.

⁴¹ Both instances of “freed” are literally “justified” (δικαιωθῆναι and δικαιούται).

⁴² Peter’s sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:14–39) resembles this same structure, offering the same language of “forgiveness of sins” (ἄφεσις ἁμαρτιῶν, v. 38) and “promise” (ἐπαγγελία, v. 39), making one wonder whether Luke is establishing a new pattern (or relaying a recently developed pattern) for Christian preaching. Furthermore, it seems significant to me that Luke separates what Peter has preached from what Luke afterward identifies as the “many other words” (ἑτέροις ... λόγοις) with which he “exhorted” (παρεκάλει) the people (v. 40).

“Preach the Bible” in Theological Perspective

1. *The Ontology of Scripture.* If we are serious about preaching from the Bible, our understanding of that act should be informed by theological reflection on what the Bible *is*. The insights of John Webster on the ontology of Holy Scripture are helpful here. Central for our purposes is his claim that the Scriptures, as revelation, are nothing short of God’s “divine self-presentation.”⁴³ Such revelation, furthermore, has a specific aim beyond some general personal disclosure of God:

Revelation is . . . the establishment of *saving fellowship*. Revelation is purposive. Its end is not simply divine self-display, but the overcoming of human opposition, alienation and pride, and their replacement by knowledge, love and fear of God. In short: revelation is reconciliation.⁴⁴

The Bible then, as Holy Scripture, postures the church to open and receive it in a very specific manner. If the Scriptures are God’s self-revelation for the purpose of establishing *saving* fellowship, then the church’s “definitive act” before that Word “is faithful hearing of the gospel of salvation announced by the risen Christ in the Spirit’s power.”⁴⁵ If one takes seriously this ontology of Scripture, then every member of Christ’s Church is obligated “to read Scripture as one caught up by the reconciling work of God.”⁴⁶ In other words, Scripture’s nature dictates Scripture’s reception. If Scripture is God’s reconciling action, we should receive it ultimately as gospel.

In another essay, Webster clarifies the “theological hermeneutics” necessitated by Scripture’s ontology by reminding us of Christ’s eternity and priority—what he calls “the categorical primacy of the resurrection.”⁴⁷ Webster argues, “[Christ] is that from which we move, not that towards which we strive; he is not that which we posit (rationally, experientially), but the one whose unqualified self-existence posits us.”⁴⁸ In reading and interpreting Scripture, then, it is not enough simply to arrive finally at Christ, or even to exposit the text with a constant Christ-centered orientation. Interpretation is much more personal and relational

⁴³ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14.

⁴⁴ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 15–16.

⁴⁵ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 44.

⁴⁶ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 101.

⁴⁷ John Webster, “Resurrection and Scripture,” in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Andrew T. Lincoln and Angus Paddison (T&T Clark, 2007), 142.

⁴⁸ Webster, “Resurrection and Scripture,” 141.

than this. As we read, we do so surrounded by Christ’s prevenient, abiding, and saving presence. Scriptural interpretation at its best, therefore, is not merely Christo-telic (culminating in Christ), or even Christo-centric (centered on Christ). It is, you could say, Christo-pleromic (saturated in Christ’s saving presence).⁴⁹

The net effect of this ontology of Scripture for preaching the Bible is becoming evident. If preaching the Bible is an activity done within the fullness of Christ’s presence, whose purpose is the establishment and maintenance of a *saving* relationship with us, then the gospel—the Word which effects and sustains that saving relationship—is not “simply one more topic to which the inquiring human mind might choose to direct itself,”⁵⁰ nor is it something only spoken to non-believers for the sake of their conversion. The gospel, theologically speaking, is what the Bible exists to give—to *everyone*, believer and unbeliever alike—from any and every passage of Scripture.⁵¹

2. *A Reformation Theology of Preaching.* The theological resources of the Church, uniquely crystalized at the time of the Reformation, are particularly useful for the present discussion.⁵² We begin by asking about the end: What is the formational goal of preaching the Bible? What are we hoping to effect through our preaching? We often answer, “changed lives,” but what precisely do we mean by that? We could say that a changed life looks like Christian maturity, and such maturity can be distilled into one word—love (1 Cor 13). Such love expresses itself in a two-way direction: vertically, toward God, and horizontally toward our neighbor (Matt 22:34–40). Love “fulfills the law” (Rom 13:8; Gal 4:14). We then must ask, “What produces this love?” Reformation theologians particularly observe the Scriptures as offering a singular answer—faith. The Reformers claimed that faith alone produces love, often quoting Gal 5:6: “In Christ Jesus,” what “counts” is “*only* faith working through love.” If the goal of our

⁴⁹ I had help with this neologism in a recent conversation with Jonathan Linebaugh.

⁵⁰ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 123.

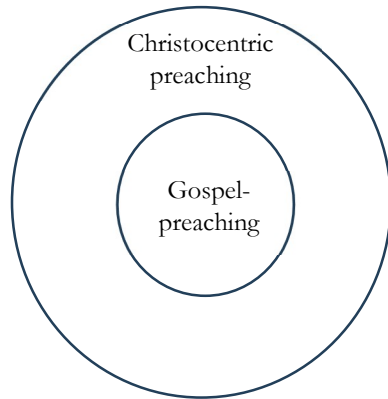
⁵¹ See Calvin: “[Christ] daily presents to us the fruit of his suffering through means of the Gospel, which he designed, should be in the world, as a sure and authentic register of the reconciliation, that has once been effected. It is the part of ministers, therefore, to apply to us . . . the fruit of Christ’s death” (*Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Calvin’s Commentaries 20.2 [Baker, 2003], 238).

⁵² The following paragraph is a summary restatement of the teaching I have heard many times from Jonathan A. Linebaugh, most recently articulated in his *The Well That Washes What It Shows: An Invitation to Holy Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2025), 152–56.

preaching is that our people become a people of love, then our aim should be toward the increase of their faith. But now we must ask, “What produces faith?” The Reformers again observed another singular answer from Scripture—the Word. The Word *alone* creates faith: “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). This, in the Reformers’ minds, reveals a “permanent relationship”⁵³ of directionality:

Word → Faith → Love

If we want to achieve the stated goal of our preaching—changed lives marked by faith-produced love—we must preach *the Word*. We have already established above that “the word” is not so much synonymous with every word of Scripture, as if preaching “the word” merely means re-saying what Scripture says. Rather, to preach “the word” is to preach the one thing that every word of Scripture exists to reveal—the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here we can now begin to make crucial distinctions. We will start with an important one.



All gospel-preaching is Christocentric, but not all Christocentric preaching proclaims the gospel. In other words, not all preaching *about* Christ counts as preaching *the Word*. One can preach a Christocentric sermon and not preach the gospel. This parallels Martin Luther’s point in his 1521 treatise on “What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels.”⁵⁴ There he argues that words about Christ, or even words *from* Christ himself,

⁵³ In Calvin’s words, “There is a *permanent* relationship between faith and the Word” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Westminster Press, 1960], 548 [3.2.6]).

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Fortress, 1960), 117–24.

must be differentiated from the Word of the gospel which gives Christ. Luther writes, “The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift ... Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works.”⁵⁵

Beyond talk about Christ, there are yet other “words” which could be spoken from the Bible that would not qualify as faith-producing preaching of the Word. Again, consider 2 Tim 3:16 and 4:2. Though “all Scripture” indeed is profitable for all kinds of Bible-based speech-ministry—exhortation, admonishment, ethical instruction, correction, etc.—none of those words creates faith and produces love.⁵⁶ None of those words actually *grows* the Christian. They may demonstrate what maturity looks like. They may point the way and illumine the path. But they are powerless words when it comes to actually moving the Christian toward that end. The Word alone, producing faith alone, by grace alone, does this.⁵⁷ “The righteous shall *live* by faith” (Gal 3:11). As it turns out, preaching the Bible, understood as preaching the Word, is a quite narrow and specific mode of speech.

Understanding this Word as “the gospel” is in our day and age by no means self-explanatory, and we must again turn to the Reformation’s theological resources to help us define precisely what the gospel is. Particularly helpful here is NT scholar Jonathan Linebaugh’s exegetical insights into Paul, resourced by Luther. Linebaugh argues that the Reformation understanding of Paul’s theology of justification by faith alone sees justification not merely as a soteriological doctrine.⁵⁸ Justification, by placing

⁵⁵ Luther, “Instruction,” 119, 120. Calvin speaks similarly: “[Paul] understands ... the new and extraordinary kind of teaching by which Christ, after he became our teacher, has more clearly set forth the mercy of the Father [in his gospel]” (*Institutes*, 548 [3.2.6]).

⁵⁶ In fact, as Calvin points out, those other words are not necessarily neutral in relationship to our faith. Sometimes, such “words are so far from being capable of establishing faith that they can of themselves do nothing but *shake* it” (*Institutes*, 550 [3.2.7], emphasis added).

⁵⁷ “Calvin understood preaching to be about much more than education, edification, reproof, or prophetic critique of the world. The preaching event was the primary means of grace. The whole drama of salvation unfolded as the gathered people listened to the sermon” (Dawn Devries, “Calvin’s Preaching,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim [Cambridge University Press, 2004], 110).

⁵⁸ Jonathan A. Linebaugh, *The Word of the Cross: Reading Paul* (Eerdmans, 2022), 159–80.

faith and works in an antithetical (“not, but”) relationship,⁵⁹ functions as an overarching “grammar” to norm the saying of the gospel. Linebaugh arrives at the following conclusion: “Justification relates to preaching, praise, and prayer as a grammatical rule: to speak the gospel, do not condition the grace of God by any human criteria; rather give Jesus Christ in the form of an unconditioned promise.”⁶⁰ Linebaugh argues persuasively that Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, as understood by Luther, functions as “a criterion, an evangelical canon that makes possible the judgment: this is or this is not the gospel.”⁶¹ How do we know we are preaching the gospel? Justification tells us that the gospel is preached when Jesus is presented as a categorical and unconditioned gift, separated from any markers of human worth, and applied at the site of our deepest need. The gospel is only the gospel when the gift of Christ (i.e., what Christ has done *for us*) is completely distinguished from all “human criteria,” including what we are to do *for Christ*. A sermon may offer many Bible-based words of admonishment, instruction, and correction, but none of those words is what it means, theologically and biblically, to *preach* the Bible. As noted above, the Christian tradition down through the ages makes room for a wide array of sermonic speech. I am not saying that Christian sermons cannot contain those things. I am saying that a sermon does not move into “preaching the Bible” until Christ is given in his gospel.

3. *A Theology of Sermonic Experience: Preaching as “Word-Event.”* The previous two sections converge here: when we preach the Bible, God creates a fresh and immediate experience of his saving presence through the gospel. A Reformation understanding of such preaching identifies this experience as “sacramental”⁶²—meaning, a local, unique manifestation of “the real presence of Christ in the kerygma”⁶³ through the power of the Holy

⁵⁹ E.g., “Not ... by works of the law, but through faith” (Gal 2:16); “No longer I ... but Christ” (Gal 2:20).

⁶⁰ Linebaugh, *The Word of the Cross*, 165. Both Luther and Calvin (though perhaps the former more than the latter) center “promise” as a primary category for reflection on the gospel. Cf. for Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*; for Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.6. On Luther, cf. esp. Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: The Reformational Turn in Luther’s Theology*, trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Fortress, 2025).

⁶¹ Linebaugh, *The Word of the Cross*, 164.

⁶² See Ronald Rittgers, “Scripture as ‘Sacrament’ in Early Modern Evangelical Church Ordinances,” *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 27.1 (2025): 28–43; Phillip Cary, *The Meaning of Protestant Theology: Luther, Augustine, and the Gospel That Gives Us Christ* (Baker Academic, 2019), 145; and David C. Steinmetz, “The Domestication of Prophecy in the Early Reformation,” *Church History* 58.2 (1989): 84.

⁶³ Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation*, 77.

Spirit. “The sermon is, by God’s will, his presence itself.”⁶⁴ The Reformers were not shy about naming the existential and sensory consequences of such an encounter. Preaching the Bible, for Calvin, should “penetrate into the consciences of men, to make them *see* Christ crucified, and *feel* the shedding of his blood.”⁶⁵

Preaching the Bible in the manner we have argued creates a “word-event in which the encounter with Jesus brings God to expression in the reality in which we live ... it becomes the event which establishes our faith.”⁶⁶ The past work of Christ becomes present “in the *kairos* of today”⁶⁷ as the Word of Scripture is “brought to life in the actual situation of the hearer.”⁶⁸ Linebaugh describes the preached Word as traversing “the gulf” between Christ past and present—“between the coming of Christ ‘for us’ and the coming of Christ ‘to us.’”⁶⁹ When the gospel is preached, it is not merely that Christ’s saving work is applied to us; Christ, the Savior, is *here*. How does preaching do this, precisely?

What homiletical content can we identify as the epicenter of this Word-event? We return to the concentric diagram above. The Word-event happens when explanatory words about Christ become promissory words which give him. “As a christological narrative, the gospel tells the story of the Christ who gave himself for me. As a christological promise spoken in the power of the Spirit, the gospel is Christ giving himself to me.”⁷⁰ Preaching the gospel is not merely the relaying of past events for present “application.” It is the transposition of those past events into a present offering—a promise from God, through the preacher, *for you*. Until Christ is announced as a gift—whether explicitly by the preacher or implicitly through the Spirit accompanying other words of the preacher—*the Bible is not yet preached*.⁷¹ The Bible may be spoken about and spoken

⁶⁴ Oswald Bayer, “Preaching the Word,” in *Justification is for Preaching*, ed. Virgil Thompson (Pickwick, 2012), 207.

⁶⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, Calvin’s Commentaries 212 (Baker, 2003), 80 (emphasis added). See also the overabundance of vivid, experiential, affectively-loaded language of what many consider to be the earliest Reformation systematic theology: Philip Melancthon’s 1521 *Loci Communes*.

⁶⁶ Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation*, 79.

⁶⁷ Bayer, “Preaching the Word,” 205.

⁶⁸ Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation*, 54.

⁶⁹ Jonathan A. Linebaugh, “The Uglier Ditch: First-Century Grace in the Present Tense,” in *The New Perspective on Grace: Paul and the Gospel after Paul and the Gift*, ed. Edward Adams et al. (Eerdmans, 2023), 270.

⁷⁰ Linebaugh, “The Uglier Ditch,” 272.

⁷¹ For what “gift” means historically and theologically in Paul’s thought, see especially John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Eerdmans, 2017).

from. Its lines may be faithfully exegeted, explicated, and expounded. But until Christ is *given*, preaching the Bible has not truly occurred, and the present Word-event remains out of reach, inaccessibly locked up in the past.

How to “Preach the Bible” (Suggestions for Sermon Preparation and Delivery)

1. *True Preaching and the Freedom of the Spirit.* The above discussion invites two questions. First, in our sermons, what do we preach *from*? The answer is certainly “all Scripture” (2 Tim 3:16). We preach from any and every part of the Bible. We open up the text, and we say enough about it to orient our hearers to its words and context. We do not springboard away from the text. We preach from it, out of it. But we must be careful to distinguish that first question from this second one: What do we *preach*? We have concluded that we cannot merely say what the text says as sometimes the text in isolation will leave us only with those “other words,” whether they be words of instruction, rebuke, correction, or admonishment. We have argued that though we preach *from* the Bible, to faithfully preach the *revelation* the Bible exists to offer—to faithfully participate in preaching becoming an event of the manifestation of the saving presence of God—we must preach “the Word” (2 Tim 4:2): the gospel about Jesus Christ, which gives Jesus Christ. What do we preach *from*? The Bible. What, or more precisely Whom, do we *preach*? Christ. To preach the Bible rightly, this distinction must hold.

Still, amidst all the belabored and technical dissecting, parsing, and explaining above, we must confess that the Word of God is living and active (Heb 4:12) and that the Holy Spirit is wildly free, beyond our control. As this is so, no amount of tools, techniques, and how-to’s can predict, much less manufacture, the Word-event that is the manifest presence of Christ’s Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Bible.⁷² We cannot make this happen through our own cleverness, or even in our firm commitment to sticking to certain best practices that we are about to entertain. In fact, the Spirit continues to reveal and give Jesus in all kinds of unlikely contexts where, despite our poor preaching, confused worship, and wayward theologies, God continues doing what God does best. Indeed, to build upon Hopkins, Christ preaches in ten thousand places.⁷³ Thank God.

⁷² Linebaugh, “The Uglier Ditch,” 278. See Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 176.

⁷³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Robert Bridges and W. H. Gardner, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1948), 95.

That said, with the vision laid out above, here I offer some on-the-ground insights for the homiletical process.

2. *What to Avoid When Preaching the Bible.* The gospel is the scriptural Word about Christ, particularly the news of his death and resurrection, which becomes good news to each person when it is received “for me” (Luther’s famous *pro me*). Insofar as it is up to the human preacher (and again, thank God it is ultimately not), we might first identify ways of speaking we want to avoid if we are intent upon preaching that gospel. Recalling our theological discussion above of the permanent relationship of word, faith, and love, we are ready to receive the categorical claim of the following simple statement by theologian Oswald Bayer: “Only if the word is promise and gift, is faith really faith.”⁷⁴ As the word, so the faith—which means that we can make the mistake, when preaching a different “word” than *the* Word, of fostering pseudo-faiths rather than living faith in Christ. Bayer offers three examples.⁷⁵ First, we can make the mistake of *theorization*. In this mode, if the proclaimed word is merely teaching—making statements and offering instruction about God, Jesus, the Bible, holy living, a biblical worldview, or anything else—then the resulting “faith” takes the form of insight and knowledge. Such faith says, “I know.” Second, we can make the mistake of *moralization*. In this mode, if the proclaimed word is merely moral appeal—urging hearers to live in certain ways, or to avoid living in other ways—then the resulting “faith” takes the form of deed, or activism. Such faith says, “I do.” Third, we can make the mistake of *psychologization*. In this mode, if the proclaimed word is merely expression—effusions about inner experience, spiritual progress, or feeling close to God—then the resulting “faith” takes the form of introspective self-awareness. Such faith says, “I am.” Notice the self-orientation of all three resulting pseudo-faiths. Neither “I know,” nor “I do,” nor “I am” offer any hope, because trust remains caged in the self. Knowing, doing, and being are the fruit of faith and must never be confused with faith itself. Therefore, only if the proclaimed Word truly is the promise and gift of Jesus Christ can faith truly be faith. Only when the Word is Christ *for me* can resulting faith be uncaged, look outside itself, and cry, “I trust,” clinging not to self but to its blessed Object: “I trust *you*, my Jesus.”

This is not to say that in our sermons, there is no place for teaching, moral instruction, or expression. But we must be clear-eyed about those forms of speech: They cannot create or sustain faith. They cannot give. They are, in the words of Paul, “powerless” (*ἀδύνατος*, Rom 8:3). We might add one final insight under the category of what to avoid in our

⁷⁴ Bayer, “Preaching the Word,” 202.

⁷⁵ Bayer, “Preaching the Word,” 201–2.

preaching before moving on to things more constructive: the gospel-promise ceases to be a promise when it is conditioned. If affixed to the promise of God's love in the gift of Jesus Christ are any "ifs," "ands," or "buts," the promise is no longer a promise. It is a contract, a two-person agreement, strings attached. It is *quid pro quo*, not *Christus pro me*. Conditional language added to, surrounding, or even in the vicinity of God's promises ends up taking back with the left hand what the right hand has given. The gospel, with a condition added, becomes "a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all" (Gal 1:6–7 NIV). We should therefore pay attention to the potential of tacking on conjunctions (either literally or figuratively) which might compromise the gospel and turn faith into a self-oriented work.

3. *A Process and Strategies for Preaching the Bible*. The process of preaching begins with the preacher's own reception of the text. Before the preacher interprets the text, the text interprets the preacher. Before the preacher opens his mouth, he must be preached *to*. As Webster says, preachers "are set in motion by the text; they do not animate it but rather are the audience of its animating utterance."⁷⁶ How does a preacher first receive a text? Certainly, this includes all our normal patterns of interpretation, including the utilization of exegetical resources at our disposal to gain an understanding of the meaning of the text in its time and place. However, our interpretation must not only discover a passage's message. It must also discover its action. If the Word really is living and active, interpretation must not only attend to what the Word *says* but to what the Word is *doing* as it speaks.⁷⁷ To borrow from theologian Simeon Zahl, we attend to the text's "affective salience."⁷⁸ We cultivate awareness of the text's psychological and emotional *effect*. Rational exegetes are not accustomed to including these features in exposition, but if Scripture is ontologically the locale of God's self-revelation, then asking, "What is God doing in and to me in this text? In what ways is God moving toward me? How does this make me *feel*?" becomes another important part of homiletical preparation alongside our other hermeneutical tools. Assessing such effects of the text on ourselves and others can helpfully put us on the trail toward discovering and differentiating what is or is not *promissory* about the passage. The restful and relieving feeling of comfort and consolation is often a sign that one is in proximity to the promise. From there we can begin to discover whether the text itself provides a homiletical promise, or puts

⁷⁶ Webster, "Resurrection and Scripture," 153.

⁷⁷ This is why I use the language of "speech-act" from modern communication studies in my introductory thesis statement.

⁷⁸ Simeon Zahl, "On the Affective Salience of Doctrines," *Modern Theology* 31.3 (2015): 428–44.

us on a larger biblical trajectory to take hold of one. We can ask, "Does this text lead me to any specific promises of God?" Even if your sermon may not articulate something as concrete as a formal promise, attention even at this stage of interpretation to the promissory character of the text will inevitably contribute the promissory flavor of the sermon.⁷⁹

Another way of engaging this living activity of the Word is to ask a simple, two-part question, "How is the Bible, through this text, showing me my need for Jesus, and how is it giving him to me?" That question can help us to hear the Spirit's voice piercing our own heart. Additionally, we can bring this question into our life and relational ministry. For example, when dealing with difficult relationships with others, we can ask of the Lord, "What does this Word have to say to that conversation or experience?"

After this process, it is time to craft words. There are several guidelines that gospel-preachers can recognize as meaningful "rules of speech," even as these rules resist slavish obedience.⁸⁰ First, when it comes time in the sermon to preach the gospel it is helpful to use second-person speech, "where an 'I' addresses a 'you.'"⁸¹ Second, it is often important to craft that address with present tense or present perfect tense verbs: "God loves you" or "Your sins have been forgiven." Future tenses also carry a strong promissory character: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb 13:5) or "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Isa 43:2). Third, it is helpful when "the 'I' of the preacher who speaks legitimates itself, implicitly or explicitly, as authorized to make this promise."⁸² Prophetic language, "thus says the Lord," is instructive here. "I say this to you, in Jesus's name," or "I, as God's minister, declare to you." I sometimes find myself saying, especially when quoting a direct promise of Scripture: "These are not my words, but God's Word to you." Fourth, our language can emphasize the prophetic "now-ness" of the Word being delivered: "Jesus says this to you, here and now." At times, one can differentiate the universality from the specificity of the Word by saying, "Though God's Word is for all people everywhere, make no mistake, God himself is saying this to you, in this room—right here, right now."

Finally, as a preacher, pay attention over time to the effects of your preaching on the overall culture of the community which receives it. The

⁷⁹ On the necessity and inescapability of attending to emotions and experience in theology, see Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, esp. 142–82.

⁸⁰ What follows is adapted and expanded from Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 202.

⁸¹ Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 202.

⁸² Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 202.

gospel bears very specific fruit. Non-gospels produce something different. A community marked by gospel-preaching (what we have argued is equivalent to “preaching the Bible”) will often become less anxious and more peaceful, less pretentious and more honest, less hostile and more gracious. In other words, preaching the Bible produces what faith borne of the Word produces: love.

Conclusion

The Word “must always be spoken anew without ever saying anything new.”⁸³ Preachers who preach the Bible in the manner I have described can be tempted to wonder whether it is sustainable, week in and week out, to say *one thing*.⁸⁴ Will we run the risk of falling into homiletical ruts, of becoming a broken record? Will our people grow dull of hearing, inoculated against the surprising wonder of the Word of the cross? Newly saying nothing new every week—knowing “nothing among” our people “except Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2)—certainly is risky. But it is the right kind of risk. It throws us into deeper dependence and greater abiding (John 15:1–11). We must depend on God for new, creative words to say the same Word. We must depend on the Holy Spirit to renew in us a hunger and appetite for the gospel alone, against the lusts of the flesh and the craving for what itching ears long to hear (Gal 5:16–21; 2 Tim 4:3). We must depend on God to show up and make good on the promise to be present—felt in our bodies and spirits—in our preaching. Preaching the Bible leaves us vulnerable. It leaves us “foolish” and “weak,” right alongside God (1 Cor 1:25). But therein, under the opposite, we discover all the power we need (Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 2:5; 2 Cor 12:9).

⁸³ Bayer, “Preaching the Word,” 203.

⁸⁴ Perhaps this is a good reason among many, when possible, for churches to have a rotating pulpit with multiple preachers rather than a singular voice.

Baptism: Doxology and (Aquatic) Theology

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Abstract: Mark Dever calls baptism “the discarded jewel of Christian churches today.” Indeed, recent worship discourse is consumed by debates about musical style while undervaluing the ordinances. This article argues that recovering baptism as an act of corporate worship requires returning to the confessional, biblical, and theological resources that Baptist churches already possess. Reading the four descriptions of baptism in *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* (obedience, symbol, testimony, and prerequisite) as a coherent theological framework, the article develops a rich account of baptism that neither collapses into sacramentalism nor reduces to mere subjective expression. Drawing on the biblical theology of water, the article argues that baptism involves a rich symbolic vocabulary, and that this vocabulary enables congregations to “see the Bible” in corporate worship. By recovering baptism, evangelical churches gain both a more faithful practice and a surprising resource for addressing the varied goals of worship renewal.

Key Words: baptism, Baptist Faith and Message, Baptists, ordinances, public worship, sacraments, symbolism in the Bible, typology, water

Baptism is the discarded jewel of Christian churches today—even of Baptist churches. Confusion, ignorance, prejudice, and a misplaced and distorting cultural conservatism all beset most churches today in their practice of baptism.

~Pastor Mark Dever¹

Chicago’s South Side is the home of the Field Museum. There, in the Grainger Hall of Gems, are literally hundreds of different jewels on display: a 37-carat tanzanite necklace, a 97.45-carat ruby topaz gem, and a 3,400-year-old Egyptian garnet necklace. The museum displays some jewels as uncut stones and mounts others in unforgettable necklaces and rings. In a literal Hall of Gems, how can a visitor take it all in? When treasure follows treasure, how is it possible not to overlook something of

great value?

A Christian worship service, like the Grainger Hall of Gems, is filled with treasures old and new. Christians value the prayers, songs, Scripture readings, the Lord’s Supper, and (of course!) the sermon as priceless elements of a worship service. But few Christians understand *baptism* as an act of worship. Why has baptism become a “discarded jewel” in worship discussions? Among all the treasures on display, why is it so easy to miss the value of baptism?

Consider two reasons. First, regular Sunday morning services rarely practice baptism.² This might be because of the scarcity of conversions, or perhaps because some baptisms are performed at camps or other para-church events. A second reason Christians do not understand baptism as an act of worship might be because the most widely read books about worship rarely address the practice or meaning of baptism.³ Perhaps these authors are trying to sensitively address differing evangelical traditions who observe a variety of baptismal practices.⁴ More likely, the divisive nature of musical styles has dominated the worship discourse to the neglect of other discussions.

This article seeks to recover this jewel by arguing that baptism is an

² Aaron Earls, “Baptisms rebound, but negative trend continues in Southern Baptist churches,” *Lifeway Newsroom*, January 23, 2024, <https://news.lifeway.com/2024/01/23/baptisms-rebound-but-negative-trend-continues-in-southern-baptist-churches/>. “More than 2 in 5 (43%) Southern Baptist churches reporting in the ACP [Annual Church Profile] had no baptisms in 2022. Close to a third (34%) baptized one to five people, while 9% saw six to nine baptisms. Around 1 in 8 (13%) reported at least 10 baptisms, including 5% who saw 20 or more baptized at their church.”

³ Many well-regarded evangelical books about worship, the key texts in the field, do not address baptism, including Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Crossway, 2008); Keith Getty and Kristyn Getty, *Sing! How Worship Transforms Your Life* (B&H Publishing, 2017); Mike Cosper, *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church’s Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Crossway, 2013); and Matt Boswell, ed., *Doxology and Theology: How the Gospel Forms the Worship Leader* (B&H, 2013).

⁴ Here, I’m thinking of the theological differences between paedo- and credo-baptism, covenant promise vs. declaration of faith, and the like. See, for example, the tensions discussed in James M. Hamilton Jr., “Baptism and Church Membership: Sometimes Obedience Results in Painful Separations,” *The Gospel Coalition*, March 4, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/baptism-and-church-membership/>.

¹ Mark Dever, “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (B&H Academic, 2006), 329.

indispensable element of Christian worship, helping believers “see the Bible” on Sunday mornings with its meaningful and beautiful practice.⁵

One resource for obtaining greater clarity on the place of baptism in Christian worship is *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* (BF&M 2000).⁶ This confessional document presents baptism with four descriptions, and each is significant for an understanding of baptism as worship. As Article VII states,

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is [1] an act of obedience [2] symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is [3] a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is [4] prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord’s Supper.⁷

⁵ The verbiage of “see the Bible” draws from the insights of J. Ligon Duncan III, “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2003), 65.

⁶ Discerning readers may rightfully question my choice of BF&M 2000 as the document by which to illuminate the dimensions of baptism. I believe that BF&M 2000 faithfully synthesizes the testimony of Scripture and I happily write and teach “in accordance with and not contrary to all that is contained therein.” I invite others to investigate their own confessional documents for further discussion of these points.

For broader historical surveys of the practice of baptism, see Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*, Liturgy, Worship, and Society (Ashgate, 2006); and *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From Luther to Contemporary Practices* (Ashgate, 2006); Paul F. Bradshaw, “Christian Initiation: A Study in Diversity,” in *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 161–84; and the magisterial Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Eerdmans, 2009).

⁷ Southern Baptist Convention, *The Baptist Faith & Message: A Statement Adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention June 14, 2000* (LifeWay Christian Resources, 2000), Section VII. <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#vii>. Numbering added and British spelling of “Saviour” retained. For interactions with BF&M 2000, see Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell, eds., *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America’s Largest Protestant Denomination* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Rob Phillips, *Understanding the Baptist Faith and Message: A Simple Study for Southern Baptists* (High Street Press, 2022); and Daniel Scheiderer, *Still Confessing: An Exposition of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000* (Founders, 2020).

Using those four descriptions, this essay argues that baptism is a glorious act of public worship.⁸ Because baptism is obedience and testimony, it must be enacted by a believer. Because baptism is symbol and prerequisite, it must be commissioned by God and performed by a church. A robust practice of baptism will be a surprising fulfillment of the goals of the various worship tribes, but more importantly, will be a profound source of edification for local churches.

Baptism as an Act of Obedience

When Baptists call baptism an “ordinance,” they draw attention to the fact that baptism is an act of obedience. As such, baptism (like all human obedience) is the conscious activity of an individual.⁹

Sacramental thinkers who view baptism as an arena of divine work may flinch at this formulation. They might be concerned it degrades baptism into a mere subjective expression of faith. They may object that the Baptist requirement of conscious, personal faith elevates an individual’s experience over God’s promise.¹⁰ But of course, Baptists disagree. The sacramental criticism diminishes the aspect of obedience. The Baptist position is that the ordinance of baptism is not merely an aquatic communication of cognitive realities, nor a watery reminder of important biblical

⁸ The discussion of baptism usually consists of an adjudication between credobaptism and pedobaptism. See the exemplary interactions in Bruce A. Ware, Sinclair B. Ferguson, and Anthony N. S. Lane, *Baptism: Three Views*, ed. David F. Wright (IVP Academic, 2009) and the insights in Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (B&H Academic, 2006), 97–162. Rather than rehashing that debate, this essay assumes the credobaptist position and spends its energy commending baptism to be robustly practiced in local church worship services as an act of worship.

⁹ Examples of non-human obedience include wind, seas, and mulberry trees (cf. Luke 8:25 and 17:6).

¹⁰ If the baptism is grounded in the believer’s awareness instead of God’s activity, critics claim that credobaptism would have Pelagian overtones. Committed pedobaptist and capacious biblical theologian Peter J. Leithart writes, “The Bible never portrays baptism as a picture of some more important event that happens without baptism. What baptism pictures happens—at baptism. Baptism works” (*Baptism: A Guide to Life from Death* [Lexham, 2021], 4, emphasis original).

truths.¹¹ The Lord Jesus Christ commands baptism. He commands believers to baptize (Matt 28:19–20), and he commands individual Christians to be baptized (Acts 2:38). Thus, baptism is something a church does and something an individual does as an act of obedience to the Lord Jesus.¹² As such, obedience is a powerful act of worship, dramatizing the matchless value of the Savior and his authority (as Lord) over both this individual being baptized and over his church.

The Benefits of Obedience

How can submerging someone in physical water spiritually benefit the person? Does the benefit exist internally in the mind of the baptized person? Or does the benefit come externally, from the action of submersion, or even the baptismal water?

To modern and post-modern people, these two options—internal volition or external causation—seem to be the only forms of influence.¹³ First, “internal volition” names the idea that what a person does ought to spring from within, uninhibited and uncoerced, and is tied up with notions of freedom and self-determination.¹⁴ Second, “causative power” la-

¹¹ Peter J. Leithart writes, “As we establish loving and trusting relations with our infants through symbols, so God speaks to infants and establishes a relation with them through the ‘visible word’ of baptism. Thus, the question ‘Should we baptize babies?’ is of a piece with the question ‘Should we talk to babies?’ Paedobaptism is neither more nor less odd and miraculous than talking to a newborn. In fact, that is just what paedobaptism is: God speaking in water to a newborn child” (“Do Baptists Talk to Their Babies?,” *Theopolis*, September 27, 1996, <https://theopolisinstitute.com/do-baptists-talk-to-their-babies/>. <https://www.biblicalhorizons.com/rite-reasons/no-47-do-baptists-talk-to-their-babies/>. Originally published at *Rite Reasons Newsletter*, no. 47: “Do Baptists Talk to their Babies?”).

¹² Attentive readers might note the introduction of a new concept: the act of baptism as an act of a particular local church. Defense and discussion of this assertion follows in this article, but see also Bobby Jamieson, *Understanding Baptism*, Church Basics (B&H, 2016), 5–15.

¹³ Much of this section is based on the logic of my paper, “How Do Baptism and the Lord’s Supper . . . Work?” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, CA, November 21, 2024).

¹⁴ Modern thinkers prize activities that spring from the internal desires of the individual. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press); and Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy:*

bels external forces which act upon an individual regardless of that individual’s agency or awareness, effecting outcomes upon them.¹⁵

We can map these two options onto our discussion of baptism. First, Baptists worry that sacramentalists treat the benefits of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as external causation.¹⁶ These elements act upon the person irrespective of their participation or their understanding, like a child’s vitamins. Whether or not a child understands the laws of nutrition or the purpose of vitamins, parents feed their child vitamins because, “It’s good for you.”

But if Baptists might worry about distributing vitamins, then sacramentalists might worry that credobaptists are passing out placebos. A placebo has no active ingredients, contributing neither nutritional nor medicinal support for the body. The only benefit a placebo provides is a

A History of Modern Moral Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 1997). This prizing of individual autonomy worked its way into the popular imagination through the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers (1902–1987) in the 1950s and 60s that emphasized self-actualization and the importance of developing according to a person’s internal nature rather than external pressures (e.g., Rogers’s best-seller, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961]).

¹⁵ Here, one might think of Charles Darwin’s struggle for survival, Karl Marx’s view on class struggle, or Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy and cultural criticism. Postmodern thinkers identify coercive power as a central force (perhaps *the* shaping force) shaping human existence, from Michel Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary institutions (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan [Vintage, 1977]) and literary critic Edward Said’s examination of imperial domination (*Orientalism* [Pantheon, 1978]; and *Culture and Imperialism* [Vintage, 1993]) to Karl Marx’s theory of class struggle (*The Communist Manifesto* [Communist League, 1848]), and Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of “the will to power” (*On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen [Hackett, 1998]).

¹⁶ In the arena of external causation, consider the sacramental terminology of *ex opere operato* (Latin for, “by the work worked”) which refers to the belief that the sacraments confer grace themselves, rather than through the minister or by the recipient. This method is distinguished from *ex opere operantis* (“in virtue of the agent”), which was the opposing position during the Donatist controversy. *Ex opere operato* means that the elements are neither signs of previously given grace, nor are they stimulants of the faith of the recipient, but they externally confer grace themselves. See John Hardon’s *Modern Catholic Dictionary* (2000). <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=33474>. Thomas Aquinas said it best: *sacramenta efficiunt quod figurant* (“the Sacraments effect what they represent”) (*Summa contra Gentiles* [Of God and His Creatures], ch. 78, <https://ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/gentiles/gentiles.vii.lvii.html>). To be fair, Thomas wrote this about the sacrament of marriage.

soothing emotional and psychological trick for the mind. No doctor would give a placebo to an infant, but a doctor might give a placebo to provide an anxious person some psychological relief from subjective symptoms. Is this what Baptists think is happening in baptism and the Lord's Supper?

By recognizing the commanded nature of baptism, believers can understand how baptism creates a third option that avoids these two extremes. God's grace arrives externally, sent to us in the person and work of Christ, and it elicits our own internal participation in faith and obedience. Thus, the benefits of baptism are neither the result of external causation nor internal volition.

Obedience is theologically understood when placed within grace rather than in place of grace (Gal 5:6; Jas 2:14–17, 26). Baptism is a believer's act of obedience, an ordinance, in response to the grace they have received, not a baptized person's initiative to earn or receive grace. When baptism's first quality of being an ordinance is combined with its second quality of being a sign of grace from God, the obedience of baptism can be understood as participation in God's activity, an enacted response to God's grace rather than a personal achievement of moral merit.

Baptism as a Divinely Commissioned Symbol

When Baptists insist that baptism is a symbol, they are not deemphasizing or reducing the reality of the activity.¹⁷ Indeed, for Baptists a symbol is not a reductionist alternative to an efficacious sacramental reality. Baptism instead is a divinely commissioned enactment, making visible and celebrating what God has done, while proclaiming what God is going to do.¹⁸

Prophetic Pageants and Gospels of Gesture

Throughout the Old Testament, God commissioned dramatic performances designed to make his message visible and compelling. His goal was to change the observers' perception of their context, their beliefs, and their actions. These sign-acts span the entire prophetic tradition, from the

¹⁷ See the quirky but welcomed contribution from James W. McClendon Jr., "Baptism as a Performative Sign," *Theology Today* 23.3 (October 1966): 403–16.

¹⁸ See D. C. Schindler's helpful contrast of the categories of symbolical ("brought together") and diabolical ("divided apart") (*Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty*, Catholic Ideas for a Secular World [University of Notre Dame Press, 2017], esp. 151–71, "Symbolical Order and Diabolical Subversion"). The irony of Schindler's ecclesial affiliation (and the series title of his monograph) is not lost on this Baptist.

early monarchy through the postexilic period, with remarkable creativity in their symbolic vocabulary.¹⁹ The prophets performed sign-acts involving clothing, objects, relationships, and personal deprivation.²⁰ Ahijah tore his garment into twelve pieces to visualize the kingdom's division (1 Kgs 11:29–39).²¹ Elisha directed Joash to shoot arrows and strike the ground, symbolizing with a simple gesture a prophetic declaration about military victories (2 Kgs 13:14–19).²² Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years to prefigure Egyptian captivity (Isa 20:1–6).²³ Jeremiah buried a linen waistband to represent Judah's ruined pride (Jer 13:1–11), smashed a potter's flask to demonstrate Jerusalem's irreversible destruction (19:1–13), and wore a yoke to symbolize submission to Babylon (27:2).²⁴ He also hid large stones at Pharaoh's palace to symbolize Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Egypt (Jer 43:8–13), and Seraiah tied a stone to

¹⁹ "Sign-acts are best interpreted as dramatic performances designed to visualize a message and in the process to enhance its persuasive force so that the observers' perceptions of a given situation might be changed and their beliefs and behavior modified" (Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, NICOT [Eerdmans, 1997], 166).

²⁰ This list is based on Kelvin G. Friebel, "Sign Acts," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 707–13. For a fuller consideration of the topic see Friebel's, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication*, JSOTSup Series 283 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). See in particular the discussion (and rejection) of the "inherent efficaciousness" of the signs (pp. 41–48).

²¹ See Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, NAC 8 (B&H, 1995), 171–73. Leithart notes that the Hebrew term translated "garment" or "mantle" contains the same consonants as the name "Solomon." Thus, the cloak of Ahijah prefigures the divided nature of the kingdom and the divided nature of Solomon's heart (Peter J. Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible [Brazos, 2006], 84).

²² See House, *1, 2 Kings*, 308 and Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings*, 233.

²³ See John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1986), 381–86. "The symbolic action here is the only one reported of Isaiah, but such activity was fairly frequent with Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Like the parables of Jesus, these actions were capable of being misconstrued by hardened hearts, but they certainly could not be overlooked" (p. 384).

²⁴ See John Goldingay, *Jeremiah*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 2021), 346–50 (shorts), 443–51 (pottery), and 568–80 (yoke).

a scroll and threw it into the Euphrates to symbolize the sinking of Babylon (51:59–64).²⁵ Zechariah crafted crowns from silver and gold to symbolize the coming royal priest (Zech 6:9–15).²⁶ Each of these acts involved different elements, actions, and material symbols.

These divine sign-acts are often commissioned with the formula “The word of the LORD came to me,” or “The LORD said to me.” The prophets performed startling actions that often seemed foolish, costly, or painful, yet each action was commissioned by God with divine authority, and as such made visible and celebrated what God has done while prophesying what God was going to do.²⁷

Baptism as a Biblical Symbol

Having considered biblical symbolism more broadly, we turn now to the aquatic nature of baptism to make three connections: life and blessing, chaos and judgment, and borders.²⁸ First, consider how biblical authors

²⁵ See Goldingay, *Jeremiah*, 802–5 (stones) and 952–56 (sinking scroll). In addition to these dramatic punctiliar events, God commanded some prophets to include ongoing dramatic gestures through their personal lives. By forbidding Jeremiah to marry, attend funerals, or join feasts, God made the prophet a walking symbol of coming devastation (Jer 16:1–9). He commanded Hosea to marry an adulterous woman and name his children Jezreel, No Mercy, and Not My People, creating a family drama that symbolized Israel’s broken covenant relationship (Hos 1:2–9). Later, Hosea bought back his wayward wife and isolated her, symbolizing Israel’s future period without king or sacrifice before the restoration (3:1–5). Jeremiah’s purchase of land during Jerusalem’s siege was a sign-act that revealed God’s intention to restore the land (Jer 32:1–44).

²⁶ See Thomas Edward McComiskey, “Zephaniah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey, 3 vols. (Baker Academic, 1998), 3:1111–22. “It is more likely that the prophet’s symbolic act expresses a hope that extends beyond the moment to a figure who more closely fits the symbol” (p. 1114).

²⁷ False prophets occasionally mimicked these dramatic gestures without divine commission. Zedekiah crafted iron horns and promised King Ahab victory over Aram, but God later revealed through Micaiah that a lying spirit had inspired Zedekiah’s performance (1 Kgs 22:11). Hananiah broke Jeremiah’s wooden yoke and prophesied Babylon’s quick defeat, but God responded by replacing the wooden yoke with iron and pronouncing judgment on Hananiah (Jer 28). These counterfeit sign-acts did not have God’s authorization, and they gave observers false confidence.

²⁸ Some of the following sections were inspired by Alistair Roberts, “The Mode of Baptism,” YouTube, *Theopolis Institute*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiMQOLcwseA>. I first drew these thoughts together in my newsletter articles, <https://matthewwesterholm.substack.com/p/baptism>.

often associate water with God’s blessing. God’s goodness (pictured by water) is shared generally with the whole earth (Ps 65:9–10, “You visit the earth and water it”). This goodness is shared especially with those in difficult circumstances (Ps 105:41, “He opened the rock and water gushed out,” describing Exod 17). God provides for both good and evil people (Matt 5:44–45), but his life-giving presence is particularly enjoyed by his followers (Ps 1:3, “like a tree firmly planted by streams of water”; 36:8; 46:4–5; cf. Ezek 47). Likewise, consider how the water in the temple served the priests (Exod 30:18–20; 1 Kgs 7) and the people (2 Chron 4:6), and how rivers of water flow from God’s temples to bless the earth (Gen 2:10–14; Ps 46:4; Ezek 47:12; John 4:14; 7:38; Rev 22:1–2).²⁹ God’s presence, symbolized by rivers and waves, is also forfeit by disobedience (Isa 48:18). In the eschaton, God’s people will finally enjoy his full presence and blessing, as pictured by a river (Rev 22:1–2). In all these examples the aquatic communicates blessing.

Second, Scripture also assigns to water a dual symbolic identity as an agent of chaos and judgment, and even death. The psalmist describes chaotic circumstances using water metaphors of floods and drowning (Ps 69:1–2, 14–15). The NT describes many journeys on chaotic and dangerous seas. From the storms on the sea of Galilee (John 6:16–21; Mark 6:46–52) to Paul’s treacherous shipwrecks (Acts 27:39–44; 2 Cor 11:25–27), the sea is portrayed as a place of terror and a destiny for the dead (cf. Rev 20:13). The OT and NT also use sea imagery to describe a chaotic person (Reuben in Gen 49:4 and the Jas 1:6 description of the doubting person “like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind”). Jesus names the roaring sea and waves as a cause of distress during the end-times (Luke 21:25–26). In the book of Revelation, Satan attacks God’s people with a river and flood (12:15), while the Beast who opposes God rises from the sea (13:1).³⁰ The Bible compares God’s judgment and wrath to breakers and waterfalls that go over a person (Ps 42:7) and waves that overwhelm (Ps 88:7; e.g., Gen 6:11–8:22; cf. Jonah 2:3). God uses the sea to overwhelm individuals and nations (Ps 78:53; Isa 8:7). In the OT and NT, water is often a place of judgement (e.g., the legion of demons

²⁹ See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (InterVarsity Press, 2004), esp. 54, 72–77, 196–98, and 341–43.

³⁰ See G. K. Beale, *Revelation*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 1999), 671–75, 682–85. For Beale’s discussion of metaphorical floods representing armies, divine judgment, and persecution, see esp. 672–73.

driving pigs into the sea in Mark 5:13; cf. Luke 17:1–2).³¹ In these examples, aquatic imagery symbolizes judgment.

Third, water marks biblical boundaries as early as the second day of creation. God divides the waters above from the waters below in Gen 1:6–7, and waters then create divisions in Gen 2:10–14, where four rivers from Eden divide the earth.³² These river partitions shape the scope of God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen 15:18–21), define the reign of a good king (Ps 72:8, “May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth!”), and mark the border of the Lord’s harvesting work (Isa 27:12). Similarly in the New Testament, water boundaries mark important territories and realms for Jesus and his disciples (Matt 8:26–28, 34).³³

Because water often marks important boundaries in the ancient world, many biblical stories involve people crossing boundary waters.³⁴ For example, the story of Abraham describes a water crossing from idolatry to true worship as God “took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan” (Josh 24:2–3, 14). Jacob likewise crosses the Jabbok to portray his transformation from a deceiver to his new identity (“Israel”) as one who wrestles with God (Gen 32:22). Crossing the Red Sea marks Israel’s crossing from slavery to freedom (Exod 14:21–31). The story of Joshua includes a water crossing through the boundary of the Jordan River from the wilderness to the promised land (Josh 3:14–17). The same Jordan River that Israel crossed with Joshua would serve as an important location to symbolize ministry transitions. It served as the setting when Moses passed his ministry to Joshua’s leadership. Similarly, when Elijah passed his ministry to Elisha’s leadership, it involved two crossings of the Jordan (2 Kgs 2:6–14). And once again, the Jordan serves as the setting where John the Baptist passed his ministry to the leadership of the Lord Jesus (Matt 3:13–17).³⁵

In the gospel narratives, the imagery of the OT becomes compounded

³¹ Of course, *waterlessness* is also a metaphor for God’s judgement. Zechariah 9:11, “As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.”

³² For an expansive understanding of this, see James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1988), 148–59.

³³ Note the location and water language found in the sequence in Matt 8:26–28, 34, “leave their region”; 9:1, “his own city.”

³⁴ “When you read the story of scripture,” Alistair Roberts notes, “one thing that you never really encounter are bridges, strangely enough” (“The Mode of Baptism”). Roberts’s generative insights instigated much of this section.

³⁵ An expansive interpretation of these connections is found in Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings*, 171–72.

at the baptism of Jesus. When Jesus submitted himself to baptism, like Jacob/Israel his identity was revealed (Matt 3:16–17) and like Joshua/Elisha, his ministry was launched.³⁶ Evocatively, Christ described the horrors of his passion as a baptism (Luke 12:50; cf. Mark 10:38). And so, Christian baptism is filled with rich biblical symbolism, connecting biblical realities of life and blessing, judgment and death, and border crossings into a single glorious symbol. Baptism pictures a Christian’s cleansing from the impurity of sin (1 Pet 3:21) and the union that believers have with each other and with Christ (1 Cor 12:23; Eph 4:4–6:1). Baptism invokes God’s dual-sided imagery of chaos and creation, symbolizing passing through the tribulations of this world and the judgment of God to receive the life-giving Spirit (Rom 8:2). Baptism reenacts several OT stories of water crossing.³⁷ This is echoed in Paul’s words in Col 1:13, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.” That is, this water ordeal marks our spiritual-spatial transition from one boundary marker to another. Thus, when believers are baptized, they are making visible the reality that they are crossing from idolatry to true worship (Abraham), from deception to wrestling with God (Jacob), from slavery to freedom (Moses), and from the wilderness to the promised land (Joshua). Their identity as sons of God is revealed and they are launched into a life of ministry.

By symbolizing and enacting these spiritual realities, baptism celebrates the work of God. Baptism celebrates God’s finished work of redemption (Christ’s crucifixion, burial, and resurrection), and it celebrates God’s current work in regeneration (believer’s death to sin, burial of the old life, and . . . newness of life). Perhaps detailing these connections bolsters the Baptist claim that symbolism is not a reduction or minimizing of God’s divine activity. Indeed, the celebration of God’s finished and ongoing work is the very purpose of the Christian worship gathering. Perhaps now we can recognize more clearly how baptism is a means for God’s people to *see* the Bible.

Baptism as a Testimony

Sacramental thinkers accuse Baptists of overemphasizing individual

³⁶ For a robust discussion of Christ’s baptism, see Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Baker Academic, 2017), esp. 68–81. Crowe’s discussion of Christ’s passion as a baptism is found on 100–101. A connection between the two is found on 187–188 and 205–206.

³⁷ See above for Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Joshua stories of crossing and their meanings.

awareness, decision, and expression as the decisive criterion of baptism.³⁸ But by defining baptism as a testimony, BF&M 2000 ensures that baptism glorifies the work of God, proclaims the gospel of God, and edifies the people of God.³⁹ Because it is a testimony, baptism cannot be a private, subjective affair. Instead, it is a public proclamation and a profound act of corporate worship.

Glorification, Edification, and Evangelism

First, because baptism is a testimony, it *glorifies the work of God*. By framing baptism as a testimony, God is the subject (and hero) of the story being told and enacted. Done well, the story of conversion does not highlight a personal decision or commitment, but instead serves as a testimony of God's decisive action to save sinners. Baptism is more than the linguistic or verbal testimony of the baptized. Indeed, the entire ceremony bears testimony to the work of God. It is an acting out and personalizing of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.⁴⁰ And the baptismal formula names the Triune God as the proper subject of the drama: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."⁴¹ God truly is the active

³⁸ For sacramental critiques of Baptist overemphasis on individual awareness, decision, and expression in baptism, see (baptism as individualistic) Casey Ross, "Why I Am Not a Baptist," *Catholic World Report*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2020/07/28/why-i-am-not-a-baptist/>; (baptism as choice) United Methodist Church, "By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism," <https://www.umc.org/en/content/by-water-and-the-spirit-a-united-methodist-understanding-of-baptism>; and (baptism as expressive public profession) Alexander Wilgus, "The Baptist Sacrament," *The North American Anglican*, March 27, 2024, <https://northamanglican.com/the-baptist-sacrament/>.

³⁹ See the excellent chapter from Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," 329–52.

⁴⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Baker, 2018), 305–28. "We died with Christ in baptism in that we were united with him in his once-for-all death. Because we are incorporated into Christ, his death becomes ours. At baptism (i.e., conversion) the death of Christ becomes ours because we share the benefits of his death by virtue of our incorporation into him" (p. 312).

⁴¹ R. T. France notes the stunning trinitarian formula that "more formally correspond[s] to later patristic formulations than might be expected within the NT period, let alone in the words of Jesus himself." He notes, "If Jesus had put the matter as explicitly as this, it is surprising that it took his followers so long to catch up with his formation. There is, however, no evidence that this is not an original part of the gospel of Matthew" (*The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Eerdmans, 2007], 1117). France's insights notwithstanding, please note that the explicit nature of Christ's words have too seldom predicted his disciples' capacity to understand and obey.

agent of the story. Relatedly, baptismal testimony emphasizes the finished work of Christ. The candidates bear witness to what Christ has done rather than what the candidate aspires to do. The baptismal immersion depicts Christ's completed work (*τετέλεσται*), accomplished before the believer descends into the water.⁴²

Second, because baptism is a testimony, it *edifies the people of God*. The act of testimony cannot be performed by an individual without a community of witnesses. Baptism edifies God's people when a congregation actively participates as faith-filled witnesses whom the candidate addresses.⁴³ The believers in a church do not simply see someone get wet; they see the gospel reenacted in a powerful and evocative way.⁴⁴ As such, they remember their own baptism and they rejoice to see the ongoing saving work of God among them. Mark Dever writes,

Such times of celebrating baptism become highlights in a congregation's life, so that common memories are treasured. Tales of a quiet and consistent, or a dramatic and monumental, change in an individual excite interest and encourage faith. The children of the church are instructed, the young believers encouraged, the old believers provided evidence that God is calling to himself those who will continue on after them.⁴⁵

As a testimony in corporate worship, the entire church is actively involved in the baptism of each believer. This communal and ecclesiastical context for the testimony of baptism also creates accountability. Because the candidate has publicly pledged their allegiance to Christ before the church, he or she invites the church's encouragement and reminder of these commitments.⁴⁶ A baptism creates an obligation beyond the moment. The baptismal candidate welcomes the church to share in the burden of correction and celebration. Similarly, the church accepts responsibility to encourage and correct the believer, cheering them on and caring about the outcome of their faith.

⁴² See the discussion in Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ed. NICNT (Eerdmans, 2018), 384–415. See also David G. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (InterVarsity Press, 1992), 173.

⁴³ David G. Peterson, writes, "In practice, public baptism can be a means of encouraging and edifying the church" (*Encountering God Together: Biblical Patterns for Ministry and Worship* [P&R Publishing, 2014], 160).

⁴⁴ Peterson comments, "Baptism takes its significance from the preaching of the gospel and is essentially an occasion for confessing it and embracing its promises" (*Encountering God Together*, 152).

⁴⁵ Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," 339.

⁴⁶ See Peterson on "Maintaining the hope we profess" (*Engaging with God*, 252–53).

Third, because baptism is a testimony, it *proclaims the gospel of God to unbelievers*.⁴⁷ As a candidate is baptized, the reasons why someone would be baptized are explained. Perhaps the administering pastor explains the baptism, perhaps the person getting baptized explains their rationale, but in either case the essentials of the gospel ought to be explicitly stated for all to hear and dramatically performed for all to see. Christ died for sins, was buried in the tomb, conquered death, and rose from the dead.⁴⁸ A baptismal service often is an occasion for an evangelistic opportunity. Any unbelievers who see a baptism can hear the testimony of the gospel and see a transformed life that authenticates the message. Candidates might invite any of their family or friends to attend the ceremony. People who might be hesitant to attend a church service might happily support their friend's "faith journey," but because baptism is a Christian testimony, a personal milestone becomes a public gospel presentation.

Attesting to the Resurrection

In baptism, the testimony looks both into the past and into the future. It depicts Christ's past resurrection and points to the believer's future resurrection. The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 says that baptism "testifies to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead." It thus testifies to belief in God's future bodily raising of all believers upon the return of Christ. This resurrection testimony glorifies God by declaring his victory over death and by magnifying his power to finish what he has started.⁴⁹ Baptism's resurrection testimony edifies God's people, sustaining hope

⁴⁷ For a recitation of this truth from a more sacramental perspective, see Robert E. Webber, "Liturgical Evangelism," *Covenant Quarterly* 64.1 (2006): 144–53.

⁴⁸ Peterson notes, "There is a new kind of service to God made possible through the preaching of the gospel. This is so because Jesus' death provides the ultimate sacrifice of atonement, fulfilling and replacing the Old Testament sacrificial system. Evangelism can be viewed as the task of challenging people to yield themselves to God, calling upon them to respond in grateful obedience to all his mercies in Christ" (*Engaging with God*, 187). This challenge to respond in yielded obedience to the mercies of Christ is well pictured by baptism.

⁴⁹ In a discussion of Rom 12, Peterson highlights how the resurrection informs worship as living sacrifices: "As those who have been brought from death to life by means of Jesus' death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:4–11), we belong to God as a 'living sacrifice' (*thysian zōsan*, cf. 6:12–14). As those called to be saints (cf. 1:7, *kletois hagiois*), we are to live out that consecrated relationship in terms of practical holiness (*hagian*, 12:1) and so prove to be acceptable or pleasing to God (*euarestonto theo*).... We are sanctified or consecrated to God because Jesus Christ died and rose for us, and because the Spirit enables us to believe the gospel and yield ourselves to God (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Thes. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2)" (*Engaging with God*, 177).

through suffering and loss because every baptism declares that death has no final claim. Present suffering will yield to future glory.⁵⁰ Baptism's resurrection testimony proclaims God's gospel to unbelievers by confronting them with the ultimate realities of death, judgment, and eternity. Unbelievers watching a baptism see Christians stake their lives on resurrection, and this declaration calls for a response from both believers and unbelievers. By describing a baptism as a testimony, Baptists clarify what baptism accomplishes without making baptism salvific. As a testimony, baptism preserves the objectivity of God's work (God deserves all the glory) and the necessity of public confession (his people must speak of what he has done).

Relatedly, testimony serves as a fitting conclusion to the Great Commission's fulfillment. Jesus commanded Christians to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them.⁵¹ Because baptism is a testimony, it serves as a fitting bridge between conversion and ongoing discipleship. New believers may not be fluent in theological nuance, but through the waters of baptism they can speak of what God has done for them.

Baptism as Prerequisite

The NT describes a clear sequence: people hear the gospel, believe, receive baptism, then join the fellowship of believers (the Pentecostal believers in Acts 2:41–42; the Samaritans in Acts 8:12; the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:35–38; Saul in Acts 9:17–19; Cornelius in Acts 10:44–48; Lydia in Acts 16:14–15; the jailer in Acts 16:30–34; Crispus in Acts 18:8; cf. Rom 6:3–4; Gal 3:26–28). The NT church connected conversion with

⁵⁰ My church (Sojourn East) meets in a converted gymnasium, and so our baptismal is a portable single-person-sized, aluminum trough that we place at the front of our church and fill with water. After some Sunday morning baptisms, a recently widowed father of two small children spoke to an elder. The widower remarked that the shape, size, and placement of our church baptismal had reminded him of the casket (!) that held his deceased wife during her funeral service at the church that year. He commented that the baptisms that morning had reminded him that he would see his wife again at the resurrection.

⁵¹ For a careful discussion of the relationship between making disciples, teaching, and baptizing, see D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Matthew–Mark*, EBC 9, red. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Zondervan, 2010), 667–69.

baptism and church membership, forming a continuous action of initiation and discipleship.⁵² From their earliest formulations, Baptist confessions have consistently taught that baptism precedes participation in the Lord's Supper.⁵³

Prerequisite for Church Membership

When churches rightfully insist that baptism serve as a prerequisite to church membership, they clarify the relationship between the visible and invisible church. Baptists recognize twin truths: first, only the Lord knows who truly belongs to him (2 Tim 2:19; cf. Num 16:5); and, second, Baptists recognize the need that local churches have in identifying their members through viable professions of faith. Baptism is the commanded sign that distinguishes members from uncommitted spectators. Anyone who attends the church may join in the congregational singing and hear the preached Word of God, but only baptized believers may join the church as a member, serve the church as an officer, and receive the Lord's Supper. Biblical congregationalism requires a regenerate church membership, where every member has a credible profession of faith. Baptist churches need clear boundaries for membership because congregations vote on budgets, pastoral calls, church discipline, and even doctrinal affairs. Meaningful congregationalism requires clear and objective criteria for who can vote on such issues. Baptism provides a public and objective act that establishes church membership rights and responsibilities.

This prerequisite allows the church to guard its purity. By controlling the front door (baptism) and by exercising discipleship (membership), the church can practice church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18. An unbaptized person has never submitted to church authority, and the church

⁵² See Nate Akin, "Why Baptism Must Precede Membership and the Table," *Church Matters: A Journal for Pastors* 6 (June 2025) <https://www.9marks.org/article/why-baptism-must-precede-membership-and-the-table>.

⁵³ "One finds the majority of [Baptist confessions] place a particular restriction on persons eligible to participate in the Lord's Supper, specifically a restriction that relates to the issue of believer's baptism" (Jason Sampler, "Southern Baptists and Restricting the Lord's Supper: A Brief Examination and Modest Proposal," *The Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 6.1 [Spring, 2009]: 60). Typical is the 1757: "Declaration of the Faith and Practice of the Church of Christ, in Carter-Lane, Southwark, under the Pastoral Care of Dr. John Gill, Read and assented to, at the Admission of Members" (Article 11); John Smyth's *Short Confession* (1610) (Article 31); the *First London Confession* (1644, and explicitly stated in a 1646 addition); the *New Hampshire Confession* (1833), Article 14. See the summary of J. L. Reynolds, "Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ (1849)," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Center for Church Reform, 2001), 391.

therefore has no basis for removing him from a fellowship that he never entered. Thus, if a church allowed unbaptized people into membership, they would confuse a watching world about who is a believer and who is merely a cultural Christian. Baptism clarifies the church's witness as a community of committed disciples. Each church exercises its unique authority when it examines candidates for baptism, administers that baptism, and grants or withholds the privileges of membership. And that includes participation in the Lord's Supper.

Prerequisite for the Lord's Supper

Requiring baptism for participation in the Lord's Supper can be uncomfortable. Evangelicals who have benefited from parachurch ministries and broad gospel-centered coalitions might grow uncomfortable when local churches make a strong distinction between the invisible and visible church. But a local church nevertheless abdicates its responsibility when it relies merely upon individuals to self-identify as Christians to participate in the life of the church.⁵⁴ New Testament believers are recognized by the church (Matt 16:19; 18:18), rather than self-declared, and so any church neglecting to discern genuine faith ceases to guard the purity of its witness (1 Cor 5:12–13).

By requiring baptism before receiving the Lord's Supper, churches follow the biblical sequence as outlined above of conversion, communion, and discipleship. While a person is not saved by their baptism, someone who refuses to be baptized demonstrates either a misunderstanding of Christ's command or an unwillingness to obey.⁵⁵ Either of these situations should give a local church great pause before admitting a person to the Lord's Supper.

The practice of closed (or close) communion protects the Table and ensures that participants understand what is and is not happening in the ordinances.⁵⁶ This sequence protects both ordinances, as removing the prerequisite cheapens both baptism and communion. The prerequisite

⁵⁴ See Russell D. Moore, "Table Manners," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 24.5 (September 1, 2011): 16–18.

⁵⁵ Individual churches are well within their rights to fence the table regarding so-called "infant baptism" in their own way. This article commends the logical consistency and discipling advantages of requiring credobaptism to participate in the Lord's Supper at a local Baptist church.

⁵⁶ Closed communion restricts participation in the Lord's Supper to the members in good standing of the particular local church. For a discussion of the various points of view with advocacy for close communion, see Dallas Wayne Vandiver, "An Argument for Close Communion in Baptist Life" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020), esp. 297–334.

preserves the distinct meaning of each ordinance by properly relating them to each other. How? The one-time immersion of baptism symbolizes a Christian's new birth while the regular meal of Lord's Supper symbolizes a Christian's ongoing dependence upon Christ. Thus, insisting on baptism as a prerequisite announces that what a corpse needs is not a meal, but a resurrection. Baptists reject both the doctrine of baptismal regeneration and the concept of cheap grace. Salvation produces obedience, and so requiring baptism (the act of obedience) addresses this tension. The person who refuses Christ's command to be baptized may indeed not possess saving faith.

Conclusion: Commending Baptism as Worship

Baptism is more than a watery rehearsal of God's past grace; each baptism is an example of God's ongoing grace to his church. Baptism truly is an act of worship. Having undergone this survey of the nature and function of baptism, consider how a robust and active practice of baptism helps to address many of the concerns and desires that the various worship tribes advocate for.

Perhaps your church's context is among the theologically light versions of Christianity. People may engage their faith lightly and show little interest in a commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, and you have become convinced that your church would benefit from greater commitment to the Savior and his cause. You may, then, desire your community to have a greater understanding of biblical theology. Perhaps you would like to ensure your worship services are theologically robust, especially as it pertains to soteriology.

Theologically starved churches should practice baptism. As this essay demonstrates, baptism is a liturgical practice that communicates a robust theology for the Christian and for the church. Simply including baptism in worship bolsters the theological content of any given gathering. Furthermore, the waters of baptism represent an incredible opportunity for Christian obedience and wholistic commitment. A robust and engaged practice of baptism in your worship service is just what you need.

Perhaps your church context is among artistically minded, aesthetically sophisticated young urban professionals. Through your general survey of culture and your personal conversations with people in your context, you have become convinced that the believers in your church and the unbelievers in your community would benefit from more artistic expression. You may, then, live in a community with a robust theatre and drama community and you feel that dramatic presentations of the gospel would resonate with your people.

Artistically minded churches should practice baptism. The waters of

baptism represent an incredible and ancient symbolic representation of the finished work of Christ. A robust and engaged practice of baptism in your worship service is just what you need.

Perhaps your church context is among more disenchanting, skeptical, and anti-authoritarian people. Your sense is that your church would benefit from less lecturing and you desire the voice of the average church member to carry more weight. You may, then, like to highlight the voices of women and the marginalized in your church.

Participatory oriented churches should practice baptism. If your church is like mine, females will constitute about half of the people who will be baptized. And in even the most complementarian church context, genuine believers are eager to hear women speak of the grace of God in their lives from the baptismal waters. The waters of baptism represent an incomparable opportunity for members of the church to edify each other by testifying to the work of God. A robust and engaged practice of baptism in your worship service is just what you need.

And perhaps you are convinced of the value and beauty of baptism, and you wish there were more people in your church coming to genuine faith in Christ and entering the waters of baptism as an act of obedience, a symbol of spiritual realities, a testimony of God's grace, and as a prerequisite to participating in the full life of your church. I join that wish. Every time we offer baptism, may the Lord open the eyes of our hearts to see all of the polished facets that are in this glorious act. Indeed, may the Lord help us to recover this discarded jewel and truly to "see the Bible." And may the Lord of the harvest send us, his workers, into his fields to make his cause known, to baptize his disciples, and to make his praise glorious.

Rich Remembrance, Faithful Witness, and Manifest Unity: Recovering Biblical and Baptist Emphases in the Lord’s Supper

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Abstract: *This article revisits Paul’s instructions for the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians, summarizing his three primary emphases: remembrance, proclamation, and communion. Then, sections on the Lord’s Supper in the 1689 Second London Confession and The Baptist Faith and Message (1925, 1963, and 2000), along with recent writings by Baptist authors, are examined for instances of these priorities. Lastly, implications of the Pauline emphases (as understood by Baptist theologians) are suggested to inform a renewed practice of the Lord’s Supper in churches today, addressing questions such as frequency, the preparation of participants, and the proper place for partaking. Overall, this article shows that Pauline priorities for the Lord’s Supper have been emphasized by Baptists (historically and recently), and that these priorities may guide Baptist churches in observing this ordinance as a time of rich remembrance, faithful proclamation, and true communion with God and others.*

Key Words: *1 Corinthians, Baptist Faith and Message, communion, Lord’s Supper, proclamation, remembrance, Second London Confession*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many churches struggled to take the Lord’s Supper together, especially when members were viewing the service via livestream video. Christian leaders debated whether a valid “virtual” Lord’s Supper was possible, and, if so, how it should be administered. The situation resulted in some Christians not partaking in this important ordinance for months, if not years.

For liturgical traditions that practice the Lord’s Supper weekly due to their emphasis on its sacramental necessity, the absence of communion

was an issue that demanded immediate attention. Without the weekly Eucharist, Catholics were “impoverished” of “an irreducible good.”¹ Episcopalians experienced “urgency and longing” to return to communion.² According to the Lutheran pastor Gordon Lathrop, churches needed to “recover and restore the biblical and liturgical reality of assembly”—including the Eucharist—rather than continue “the emergency electronic means” which were not a true assembly—or Supper—at all.³ Meanwhile, many pastors in churches that did not observe the Supper on a weekly basis focused on current issues that were causing conflicts among their members and eroding the unity of the local church.⁴

Due to the questions that arose over the validity of leading the Lord’s Supper via livestream video, as well as the conflicts that arose in the local church, some pastors in Baptist churches began to reconsider the significance of the Lord’s Supper for their times of gathered worship. Would communion around the Lord’s Table, practiced faithfully according to biblical teaching, assist the church in regaining its gospel focus? Could this ancient rite of worship, instituted by Christ himself, help heal the wounds of division and bring their churches back together?

In this article, we will first examine Paul’s instructions for the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians, summarizing the primary emphases evident in this NT epistle.⁵ Then, after briefly considering two Baptist confessions,

¹ Anthony R. Lusvardi, SJ, “Spiritual Communion or Desire for Communion?: Sacraments and Their Substitutes in the Time of COVID-19,” *Worship* 96 (April 2022): 177.

² Ruth A. Meyers, “Spiritual Communion as a Response to Hunger for Christ,” *ATR* 104.1 (2022): 89.

³ Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Assembly: A Spirituality* (Fortress Press, 2022), 51. Lathrop does affirm that, in “this recent and painful time of the pandemic, ... the wisest and most caring course has been not to assemble at all” (p. ix).

⁴ According to a September 2021 report by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “41% of churches struggled to adapt to [COVID] restrictions,” “24% of churches had moderate to severe conflict around COVID restrictions,” and for 67% of clergy “2020 was the hardest year for ministry” (p. 2). In addition, “42% of congregations struggled to maintain contact and a sense of community with their membership” (p. 7). Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregational Responses” (November 2021), available online at <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/research/national-survey-research/navigating-the-pandemic-a-first-look/>.

⁵ One reason to return to Paul’s instructions for the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians is that this epistle was most likely written before any of the Gospels. As

a survey of recent theological literature by Baptist authors will reveal some recurring convictions regarding the Lord's Supper.⁶ Lastly, Paul's emphases, as understood by Baptist authors, will be applied to more practical questions such as the frequency of practice of the Lord's Supper, the preparation of participants, the value for unbelievers that are present but do not participate, and the proper place for partaking. Overall, this article will show that Pauline priorities for the Lord's Supper have been emphasized by Baptists (historically and recently), and that these priorities may guide Baptist churches in observing this ordinance as a time of rich remembrance, faithful proclamation, and true communion with God and others.

Revisiting Paul's Instructions for the Lord's Supper

Paul's first canonical epistle to the church at Corinth deals with many problems. By chapter 11, the apostle has addressed divisions over their perceived leadership (1 Cor 3:22; cf. 1:10–17; 3:1–23), misunderstandings of apostolic authority (4:1–21), improper handling of sexual immorality (5:1–13; 6:12–20) and lawsuits in the church (6:1–11), questions regarding marriage and singleness (7:1–40), and whether Christians should partake of food offered to idols in pagan ceremonies (8:1–13; 10:1–33).⁷ This article focuses on Paul's concerns over the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11:17–34. However, a fuller understanding of Paul's specific instructions entails

David S. Dockery confirms, "It is practically certain that 1 Corinthians was written before the Gospels, which means that it is the earliest account we have of the supper's institution. It is indeed the earliest record of any words of the Lord Jesus that Paul described in detail. For this reason, many consider it the most revealing and helpful text on the Lord's Supper" (David S. Dockery, "The Church, Worship, and the Lord's Supper," in *The Mission of Today's Church: Baptist Leaders Look at Modern Faith Issues*, ed. R. Stanton Norman [B&H Academic, 2007], 39).

⁶ This article seeks to address the Lord's Supper from a distinctly Baptist perspective. Although there is much to learn about the Supper from other Christian traditions (including the vast literature on the Eucharist from Catholic and Orthodox perspectives), and ecumenical dialogue provides invaluable insights, for the purposes of this article supporting quotes and references will come almost exclusively from commentators and theologians with Baptist convictions.

⁷ James Hamilton categorizes the problems that Paul is addressing as (1) factionalism (chaps. 1–4), sexuality/gender issues (chaps. 5–7), and idolatry (chaps. 8–10), summarizing that "False worship (1 Cor 8–10) is to be replaced with true worship (1 Cor 11–14)" (James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Lord's Supper in Paul: An Identity-Forming Proclamation of the Gospel," in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford [B&H Academic, 2010], 76).

consideration of other passages (especially 1 Cor 10:16–17) and the context of the entire epistle.⁸ The following seeks to understand Paul's instructions in the context of 1 Corinthians and appreciate these as prescriptive for the church today.

Remembrance as Response

Paul's first emphasis is clear in 1 Cor 11:23–26 as he repeats what he has "received from the Lord" (v. 23),⁹ often referred to as the "words of institution." In the instructions (which Paul had "delivered to" the Corinthian church before, v. 27), he retells the account of Jesus and the disciples gathering for the Last Supper (cf. Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–23), quoting Jesus's commands to "Do this in remembrance of me" (vv. 24 and 25, cf. Luke 22:19).

What were his disciples to "do"? They were to take the bread and the cup as an act of remembrance of the Lord Jesus, who gave his body and blood. In the context of a Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus transformed the simple action of eating and drinking into a new and profound ritual meant to be done as a reverent commemoration of his suffering on the cross: "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7). Hamilton details how this act of remembrance for Jesus's disciples parallels that of the Passover, stating, "Just as Israel was instructed to remember what took place at the exodus by celebrating the Passover (Exod 12:14; Deut 16:3), so Jesus instructs His disciples to continue to partake of the bread that is His body for His 'remembrance.'"¹⁰ Likewise, Jesus's instructions to drink the cup "in remembrance"—similar to the cups of wine at the Passover—point back to blood poured out as part of a covenant ceremony. As Moses had poured out blood to ratify the old covenant (Exod 24:3–8), so the cup of the Lord's Supper—representing his blood poured out for them (Rom 3:25; 5:9; Eph 1:7; Col 1:20)—institutes "the

⁸ In contrast to 1 Corinthians 1–10, where Paul is seeking to correct various problems in the church, chapter 11 begins to put forth a positive view of what should happen "when you come together as a church" (v. 18) for the purposes of worship. He addresses the Lord's Supper (chap. 11), the use of spiritual gifts (chaps. 12–14), the proclamation of the gospel (chap. 15), and offerings to support the church in Jerusalem (chap. 16).

⁹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ Hamilton, "The Lord's Supper in Paul," 87–88.

new covenant” (v. 25; cf. Matt 26:27–28).¹¹

In response to Jesus’s command to his first disciples, Christians today continue to partake of the bread and the cup as an ordinance of worship intended to evoke Christ’s death. As Thomas Schreiner and Matthew Crawford explain, “Jesus’ death for sinners is so important and fundamental for Christians that our Lord commanded us to continue to observe this meal in His remembrance.”¹² Therefore, as we take the bread and drink from the cup, we are to dwell on the events of Christ’s Passion, recalling with thanks that “Jesus died for me.”¹³

Proclamation through Words and Symbols

Paul’s second emphasis is also clear from the words of the institution. Paul reiterates that eating the bread and drinking from the cup serve as a means of proclamation of “the Lord’s death until he comes” (v. 26; cf. Matt 26:29; Mark 14:25). This proclamation is accomplished through both biblical words and biblical symbols.

Regarding the words used in the ordinance, Paul instructed the church at Corinth by repeating Christ’s own words (vv. 24 and 25). Regarding the symbols used, Paul concisely explains how Jesus “took bread” (v. 23) and “took the cup” (v. 25). He then makes clear that participative action is required, calling the Corinthians to “eat this bread and drink the cup” (v.

¹¹ For more on Jesus’s interpretation of the wine, see Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Kregel, 2006), 396–98. In response to objections to the Last Supper as a Passover observance (based on readings of the account in John’s Gospel), Ross provides ten points of evidence to affirm the Supper’s Passover origins (pp. 392–94). I also commend Hamilton’s reading of 1 Cor 11 in light of the Exodus (“The Lord’s Supper in Paul,” 85–91), which climaxes with these words: “The Corinthians have experienced the new exodus: Christ is the new Passover lamb whose blood covers them and removes God’s wrath; ... they have entered into a new covenant; ... and they journey through the wilderness toward the kingdom of God, partaking of the Lord’s Supper as Israel partook of the manna and celebrated the feasts of God’s deliverance” (p. 91).

¹² Schreiner and Crawford, “Introduction,” in *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford [B&H Academic, 2010], 1.

¹³ The emphasis of thanksgiving (*eucharist*)—an appropriate response for saved sinners—is also implied here in 1 Cor 11. The fact that Jesus gave thanks before sharing the elements is recorded here in 1 Cor 11:24 as well as three of the four Gospel accounts (Matt 26:26–27; Mark 14:22–23; Luke 22:17–19). In Matthew and Mark, Jesus blesses the bread and gives thanks for the cup. The Gospel of Luke and 1 Cor describe how Christ gave thanks before he broke the bread (cf. John 6:11).

26). As Christ-initiated symbols (with rich Passover connections), the bread and the cup serve as irreplaceable tokens pointing to what made salvation possible. These tangible signs that are taken in the hands and tasted in the mouth signify the body and blood of Christ.

The words and symbols identified by Paul set the pattern for Christian observances of the Lord’s Supper. By reading the words of institution (either from 1 Cor 11 or the Gospel accounts), Christian leaders today follow Paul’s instructions and repeat Christ’s words. By eating of the bread and drinking from the cup, Christians declare to those around them, “This I believe” and “in this do I trust”—Christ’s body was broken for me and his blood poured out for my salvation.

How long are we to proclaim this message? Paul adds to his explanation in v. 26 the simple phrase “until he comes.” In partaking of the Supper, Christians “renew our commitment to proclaim Christ’s death until faith becomes sight and remembrance becomes reality.”¹⁴ As Christians, we are to proclaim that Jesus died and “He is risen indeed!” (cf. Luke 24:34). Therefore, we anticipate Christ’s return.

Communion with Christ and His Church

Beyond the clear emphases on remembrance and proclamation in Christ’s words of institution (1 Cor 11:23–26), additional emphases can be discerned from Paul’s teaching and instructions beyond these verses.¹⁵ Beginning in v. 27, he addresses taking the Supper “in an unworthy manner” and speaks to the dire consequences of doing so: such people are “guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord” (v. 27), which results in sickness, death (v. 30), and being “judged by the Lord” (v. 32).

What does it mean to partake “in an unworthy manner”? What does it mean to be “guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord”? Although many possibilities have been suggested, ranging from disrespect for the elements to guilt for crucifying Christ, what seems clear is that

¹⁴ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Kregel, 2005), 283.

¹⁵ Hamilton’s chiastic outline of 1 Cor 11:17–34 helps to show how the passage is centered on “proclaiming the Lord’s death until He comes” (vv. 23–26) and “partaking in a worthy manner” (vv. 27–32) while at the same time addressing the problem of disunity in the church at Corinth: “Corinthian anti-gospel divisions at the Lord’s Supper” (vv. 17–22) and “receiving one another at the Lord’s Supper” (vv. 33–34). As he summarizes, “The remedy for the problematic behavior outlined in 1 Cor 11:17–22 is proposed in 11:33–34, and the worthy manner in which the Corinthians are to proclaim the Lord’s death as they partake of the Lord’s Supper (11:23–26) is outlined in 11:27–32” (Hamilton, “The Lord’s Supper in Paul,” 79).

approaching the Supper without due reverence for the ritual which Christ commanded and the symbols that he instituted may bring the Lord's discipline.¹⁶

In contrast, Paul seeks to guide the Corinthian church to take the Supper in a worthy manner and to experience the remarkable benefits of doing so. He gives instructions that will prevent believers from taking the Supper in a way that would bring judgment upon themselves: before partaking, believers should "examine" themselves (v. 28) and by doing so, judge themselves "truly" (v. 31). Such an examination should lead to confession of sin and the intention to live a righteous life, to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). Such a careful approach to the Table takes seriously both its significance and our own sinfulness.

By practicing examination and repentance, believers prepare themselves for an experience of true communion with Christ at the Supper. This is implied in 1 Cor 11 but can be understood more fully considering Paul's explanation regarding "the cup of blessing" and "one bread" in 1 Cor 10:16–17. In 1 Cor 11:27, Paul repeatedly emphasizes that the bread and cup—"the body and blood"—are "of the Lord." Hence, these elements at the Lord's Table belong to the Lord. Back in 1 Cor 10:16, drinking from the cup and eating of the bread is equated with "a participation in the blood of Christ" and "a participation in the body of Christ." As Dockery explains, "The word participation is a translation of *koinonia* and includes the ideas of spiritual communion or fellowship."¹⁷ Therefore, through the Lord's Supper we are to experience communion with Christ. If taken in a worthy manner, the believer will experience fellowship with the Lord.

However, the content and context of 1 Corinthians makes it clear that Paul also understands the Lord's Supper as communion with Christ's church. Regarding the Supper, Paul's brief comments in chapter 10 and instructions in chapter 11 point to an understanding of the meal—when practiced properly—as a unifying activity, while shedding more light on what it means to take the Supper in a "worthy" manner. First, in 1 Cor 10:17, Paul emphasizes the "one bread" that "we all partake of," signifying that the "many are one body" (cf. Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12:12–31). As Hammett writes, "First Corinthians 10:16–17 links the Lord's Supper to

¹⁶ A full discussion of what Paul means by partaking in "an unworthy manner" and the resulting guilt is beyond the scope of this article. For a helpful treatment, see John S. Hammett, *40 Questions About Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Kregel, 2015), Question 34, "What Does It Mean to Partake of the Lord's Supper in an Unworthy Manner?"

¹⁷ Dockery, "The Church, Worship, and the Lord's Supper," 48.

the unity of the body. As we partake of the one loaf, we renew our commitment to the body."¹⁸ The Supper was intended to be a meal that expressed the unity of the body.¹⁹

Furthermore, in 1 Cor 11, the "unworthy" approach to the Supper not only dishonored Christ, but also his earthly "body," the church that was intended to be "one body" (1 Cor 10:17).²⁰ The "divisions" (1 Cor 11:18) and "factions" (1 Cor 11:19) evident among the believers at Corinth when they came together to eat and drink was directly opposed to the nature of the meal that "was established to manifest their unity."²¹ And, as Mark Taylor observes, "To shame others and to show contempt for the church of God (11:22) is to be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord."²²

This brings into view Paul's warning regarding "discerning the body (v. 29)." While some read the phrase in v. 29 as a shortened expression of "the body and blood of the Lord" (v. 27), others, in consideration of the context of 1 Cor 11, understand that "the body" should be "discerned"

¹⁸ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 282.

¹⁹ Paul's concern for unity among the believers at Corinth repeatedly relates to issues of worship practice, beginning with how various factions in the church bragged over who had performed their baptism (1 Cor 1:10–17). Later, Paul addresses the misuse of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12–14). Based on Paul's comments, it is obvious that the Corinthian church was using their so-called "gifts" in such a way that did not benefit the church (14:6), prevented understanding (14:7–11), and lacked order (14:23, 40). All of this was bound to create even more disunity in the church.

²⁰ As Brian J. Vickers explains, "Though discussion of being worthy or unworthy to take the Supper is often linked exclusively to personal, hidden, or private sins, Paul's concern is not limited to individual sin.... The Corinthians are sinning against one another and doing so at a time when they ought to be the most united" ("The Lord's Supper: Celebrating the Past and Future in the Present," in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford [B&H Academic, 2010], 327).

²¹ Hammett, *40 Questions About Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 173. As Ciampa and Rosner lament, "The sad irony was that the Corinthians were not actually 'coming together' when they came together, but gave clear indications of being a divided and disorderly group, which reflected poorly on Christ and on themselves.... The Lord's Supper, like the Passover meal on which it was based, should have served as an experience that strengthened the unity of God's people, not one that would divide them" (Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC [Eerdmans, 2010], 543, 544–45).

²² Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, NAC 28 (B&H, 2014), 275.

as the church.²³ If this is true, Paul is here expanding his instructive warning to say, “In addition to considering the Lord Jesus, do not eat the Supper without recognizing the church.”²⁴ Believers are to eat together with brothers and sisters in Christ in a way that shows deference, “wait[ing] for one another” (v. 33) instead of “[going] ahead with his own meal” (v. 21). Instead of an experience of disunity among professing believers, the Supper should be an occasion of profound unity and fellowship.

In sum, Paul gives instructions in 1 Cor 11 regarding the Lord’s Supper in response to the disunity and disorder that were occurring as the Corinthian church gathered (vv. 17–22). He addresses the liturgical problem by repeating the “words of institution” given by the Lord Jesus, emphasizing the command to take the Supper in remembrance and as a proclamation. He confronts the dishonoring of the Supper and disunity of the church by admonishing the Corinthians to first “examine” themselves, then come to partake of the Supper as a means of true communion with God and others.

Reclaiming Baptist Theological Emphases Regarding the Lord’s Supper

Reviewing Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians leads us to ask: Have Baptists emphasized the same things that Paul did in his apostolic instructions? In their ceaseless quest for more biblically faithful worship,²⁵ have Baptists sought to honor Paul’s teaching? To assess the situation, the following will briefly consider two Baptist statements of faith and then present a synthesis of authors representing recent Baptist convictions.²⁶ In

²³ According to Taylor, there are three primary views of Paul’s phrase “discerning the body” in v. 29: (1) distinguishing the Lord’s Supper from other meals (e.g., Leon Morris), (2) understanding the elements as representing “the death of Christ” (e.g., Anthony Thiselton), and (3) recognizing “the church as the body of Christ,” based on the lack of the genitive phrase “of the Lord” (e.g., Gordon Fee) (*1 Corinthians*, 276–77).

²⁴ Regarding 1 Cor 11:29, Hamilton argues that “No distinction should be drawn between the body of Jesus and the church. Both are in view” (“The Lord’s Supper in Paul,” 97). Likewise, Schreiner understands the warning in v. 29 to relate to both Christ’s death and the congregation (Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, TNTC [IVP Academic, 2018], 133).

²⁵ For examples from seventeenth-century English Baptists, see Matthew Ward, *Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive* (Pickwick, 2014).

²⁶ The collected essays in Scheiner and Crawford’s 2010 edited collection, *The*

the end, this section will show that some Baptist theological understandings of the Lord’s Supper line up closely with the Pauline emphases on remembrance, proclamation, and communion.

The Second London (Baptist) Confession (1689)

In 1689, Particular Baptist ministers in London signed the Second London Confession. Chapter 30 of this statement consists of eight full paragraphs addressing the Lord’s Supper. Its first paragraph states:

The Supper of the Lord Jesus, was instituted by him, the same night wherein he was betrayed, to be observed in his Churches unto the end of the world, *for the perpetual remembrance, and shewing forth the sacrifice in his death*[,] confirmation of the faith of believers in all the benefits thereof, their spiritual nourishment, and growth in him, their further ingagement [*sic*] in, and to, all duties which they owe unto him; and *to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other.*²⁷

According to the confession, the Supper should be “observed” for “remembrance,” looking back to Christ’s death, and continued as a “perpetual” practice by faithful Baptist churches. Secondly, this ordinance serves as an act of proclamation which “[shows] forth the sacrifice in his death.” Paragraph 2 clarifies that Christ’s Supper is “only a memorial of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the crosse, once for all” and that “Christ’s own only sacrifice” is “the alone propitiation for all the sins of

Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes (in the NAC Studies in Bible & Theology series published by B&H Academic) present some of the best evidence of recent Baptist engagement with the Lord’s Supper. Chapters from this collection are referenced repeatedly above and below.

²⁷ W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), 270–72 (emphasis added). The full content of the Second London Confession is available online at <https://www.the1689confession.com>. This paragraph from the Second London Confession includes emphases that go beyond the three identified above with regard to Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians. See Michael A. G. Haykin, *Amidst Us Our Beloved Stands: Recovering Sacrament in the Baptist Tradition* (Lexham Press, 2022), 33–34. Kindle Edition. For more on the English Baptist emphasis of “spiritual nourishment,” especially in the fifty Eucharistic hymns of Joseph Stennett (1663–1713), see Andrew M. Lucius, “Hast Thou, My Soul, Thy Savior View’d?: Eucharistic Piety in the Hymns of Joseph Stennett” (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2025).

the Elect.”²⁸ Third, the words of the confession explicitly relate the Supper to the believers’ communion: it is “a bond and pledge of their communion with [Christ], and with each other.” Therefore, Paul’s emphases of remembrance, proclamation, and communion are all evident in the Second London Confession.

The Baptist Faith and Message (1925, 1963, 2000)

The lengthy article on the Lord’s Supper found in the Second London Confession may be contrasted with that of The Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M), which was first adopted as a statement of faith by Southern Baptists in 1925. This document includes only one sentence on the Lord’s Supper. Describing the Supper in relation to the other church ordinance recognized by Southern Baptists, it reads: “[Baptism] is prerequisite to the privileges of a church relation and to the Lord’s Supper, in which the members of the church, by the use of bread and wine, commemorate the dying love of Christ.” In 1963, the statement—still only one sentence—was revised to state: “The Lord’s Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.” This 1963 statement was retained verbatim in the 2000 revision of the BF&M.²⁹

Although brief, these statements from the BF&M make clear several key emphases of the Supper in line with Paul’s teaching. First, it is an “act of obedience” (1963/2000), as the Lord Jesus commanded us to practice this (1 Cor 11:24 and 25), alongside believer’s baptism. Second, it is done for the purpose of remembrance: “to commemorate the dying love of Christ” (1925) or “memorialize the death of the Redeemer” (1963/2000). Through mention of Christ’s “second coming,” the 1963/2000 statement also evokes Paul’s instruction to practice the Supper as a proclamation “until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). Therefore, these Baptist statements identify the Supper as an ordinance which encourages remembrance as well as anticipation but lack attention to its role in proclamation or any hint of

²⁸ As Paul did in 1 Cor 11, the English Baptist authors of the Second London Confession addressed (at length) what they saw as misunderstandings or errant practices of the Supper, including “the Popish sacrifice of the Mass” (paragraph 2), “The denial of the Cup to the people” (paragraph 4), and “Transubstantiation” (paragraph 6). The confession also distinguishes “worthy receivers” (paragraph 7) with those “unworthy of the Lord’s Table” (paragraph 8), quoting Paul’s warning in 1 Cor 11:27 and 29.

²⁹ For a side-by-side listing of the articles from the 1925, 1963, and 2000 versions of the BF&M, see “Comparison Chart,” The Baptist Faith and Message, <https://bfm.sbc.net/comparison-chart/>.

communing with Christ and his church.

Since 2000, Baptists have given more voluminous attention to the Supper, bringing fresh biblical insights and theological convictions. The following shows how these more recent writings reclaim more of Paul’s emphases in 1 Corinthians, while maintaining that the Supper is a ritual of remembrance.

As Rich Remembrance

For those familiar with Baptist history since the seventeenth century,³⁰ it comes as no surprise that the Pauline emphasis on remembrance (based on Christ’s commands) remains the strongest among Baptists. In a Baptist church building with traditional furnishings, one needs to look no further than the central table in the worship space with the words “In Remembrance of Me” engraved on the front.³¹

While not seeking to minimize the memorial nature of the Supper, recent Baptist authors are keen to point out that this sacred meal is not an act of mere recollection. Drawing upon a deeper understanding of the biblical motif of “remembrance” in the OT and its usage in the NT, multiple writers point to something that goes beyond mere memorialism. Describing its OT significance, Vickers explains that “to remember . . . is not merely to list some historical facts, or to recall a piece of personal, experienced history; it is to take part in those events now in the remembering of them.”³² Giving attention to the NT and the meaning of the Supper in the early church, Dockery observes that

the remembrance of Christ in the biblical sense is different from our modern notion of remembering, which generally means a

³⁰ For a helpful survey, see Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (B&H Academic, 2015).

³¹ Since the nineteenth century there has been a persistent Zwinglian tendency in the Baptist tradition, sometimes prioritizing the memorial aspect of the Supper in a way that overshadows or excludes other biblical themes. This is clear in the terse BF&M statements above in their use of “commemorate” (1925) and “memorialize” (1963/2000) as the primary verbs related to the ordinance. On the prominence of the Zwinglian “memorial” view, see Haykin, *Amidst Us Our Beloved Stand*, 29, 44–46. For a fuller view of Ulrich Zwingli’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper beyond its simplification as the “memorial view, see Bruce A. Ware, “The Meaning of the Lord’s Supper in the Theology of Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531),” in *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford [B&H Academic, 2010], 229–47).

³² Vickers, “The Lord’s Supper,” 321.

mental transportation of thought back to the moment of the occurrence of an event. It is rather the dynamic recalling of the past so that it again becomes a present reality that is operative in which we may share. The supper, then, is a dynamic remembrance of the life and death of our Lord.³³

Therefore, the “remembrance” that is expected as believers practice the Supper is not simply bringing historical facts to mind. As Hammett makes clear, “The word *ἀνάμνησις*, remembrance, is far richer than a mere recollection or commemoration. It is recalling an event with such vividness and power that it affects the present, bringing all the benefits of Christ’s death to bear, remembering that his body was broken ‘for you’ (1 Cor 11:24).”³⁴ In sum, as churches practice the Supper “in remembrance of [Christ],” contemporary Baptist theologians are calling them to experience a rich form of remembrance.

As Perpetual Proclamation

Although the Southern Baptist sentences from the BF&M do not explicitly state the word “proclamation,” the BF&M article on “Evangelism and Missions” (included in all three editions of the BF&M) leaves no doubt about the denomination’s commitment to gospel witness.³⁵ More recent Baptist authors have emphasized and explained how the Lord’s Supper serves as a witness in symbolic form. Dockery states, “The observance of the supper acts as a sermon and proclamation of the death that it commemorates.”³⁶ The Supper is not replacing a preached sermon, but it does accomplish something similar. Dockery adds that “this continuing practice, when regularly observed by the Lord’s people, can become a constant publishing of the gospel by visible word and deed.”³⁷ Likewise, Matthew Emerson and Lucas Stamps assert that “the Lord’s Supper is the gospel Word visually and bodily proclaimed The Lord’s Supper is the gospel proclaimed visibly and materially.”³⁸ This emphasis on the visual aspects of the Supper—the eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup—is in line with the BF&M’s language of seeing the Supper as “a symbolic act” (1963/2000). Although open to local forms

³³ Dockery, “The Church, Worship, and the Lord’s Supper,” 44–45.

³⁴ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 282.

³⁵ For the BF&M 2000 version, see “XI. Evangelism and Missions,” *The Baptist Faith and Message*, accessed December 13, 2025, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#xi>.

³⁶ Dockery, “The Church, Worship, and the Lord’s Supper,” 41.

³⁷ Dockery, “The Church, Worship, and the Lord’s Supper,” 43.

³⁸ Matthew Emerson and Lucas Stamps, *The Baptist Vision: Faith and Practice for a Believers’ Church* (B&H Academic, 2025), 43.

that best convey their significance, the bread and cup are irreplaceable symbols, instituted as part of the commands of Christ (1 Cor 11:24–25).

As Paul instructed, this ordinance of symbolic proclamation should be practiced “until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). Indeed, to “anticipate His second coming” (BF&M 1963/2000) is required for the full gospel message to be intact. Coleman Ford and Shawn Wilhite make this point, writing:

There is no faithful gospel proclamation without the return and judgment of Christ. “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again” is the hope-filled cry of the church. When we gather around the table of our Lord, we take bread and wine to remember both his body and blood, as well as “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26).³⁹

The Supper thus functions as a multi-dimensional message: not a memorial that merely looks backwards, but one that perpetually proclaims Christ’s death, implicitly acknowledges his resurrection, and looks forward to his second coming.

As Communion with Christ

Understanding the Supper as a commemoration of past events and a proclamation that anticipates the future return of Christ is in line with Paul’s clear emphases in 1 Cor 11. But focusing on these alone may overlook the possibility of Christ being present during the observance today.⁴⁰ Recent Baptist writers point out the limitations of such a view and encourage churches not to miss Christ’s presence at the Lord’s Supper.

For example, in *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship*, Daniel Block (an evangelical biblical scholar with [ana]baptistic convictions) asserts that, “when we eat and drink with hearts that are pure and lives that are clean, we do indeed experience anew the life-giving grace of Christ, who is personally present through his Spirit.”⁴¹ Block’s statement exemplifies what is distinctive about many Baptist claims: There are certain qualifications regarding the practice of the Supper in order for us to expect Christ’s presence. He identifies the importance of partakers having “hearts that are pure and lives that are clean,” in line with the practice

³⁹ Coleman M. Ford and Shawn J. Wilhite, *Nicaea for Today: Why an Ancient Creed (Still) Matters* (B&H Academic, 2025), 82.

⁴⁰ The question of the “real presence” of Christ at the Lord’s Supper has been debated by theologians for centuries. For concise examinations of the issue from a Baptist perspective, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Baker Books, 2013), 1046–47; and Hammett, *40 Questions About Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, Question 31, “In What Sense Is Christ Present in the Lord’s Supper?”

⁴¹ Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Baker Academic, 2014), 160.

of self-examination and repentance.

In “The Church, Worship, and the Lord’s Supper,” Dockery warns of “focus[ing] only on the past and future work of Christ” when practicing the Supper and thereby “miss[ing] the present ministry of Christ in the life of the believing community.”⁴² The qualification apparent in Dockery’s phrase “the believing community” is the necessity of faith for experiencing the presence of Christ in the Supper. Only believers in Christ will encounter his presence at the Supper.

Likewise, in a chapter that encourages “Celebrating the Past and Future in the Present” in observances of the Lord’s Supper, Vickers argues that faith is “the key to the presence of Christ.”⁴³ He points to the meal that the resurrected Christ has with the two disciples in Emmaus (Luke 24:13–32) and concludes that “Though Jesus is not revealed visibly to us in the Supper, He is seen *by faith* through the analogy of the bread and the cup.”⁴⁴

Beyond the personal purity or faith of believers, recent Baptist writers—including Dockery, Block, as well as Mark Dever—stress that the work of the Holy Spirit is essential for Christ’s presence at the Table.⁴⁵ Dockery affirms that such is “made possible by the work of the Spirit.”⁴⁶ Likewise, Dever states that “the Lord’s Supper . . . is entirely dependent

⁴² Dockery, “The Church, Worship, and the Lord’s Supper,” 48. Hammett observes that “Baptists have been so concerned to deny Christ’s physical presence that they have often in effect seemed to teach a doctrine of real absence. Wherever else Christ’s presence may be found, don’t look for it here!” (*Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 281). Likewise, Erickson notes that “Out of zeal to avoid the conception that Jesus is present in the elements in some sort of literal way, some have sometimes gone to such extremes as to give the impression that the one place where Jesus most assuredly is not to be found is the elements of the Lord’s Supper” (*Christian Theology*, 1047).

⁴³ Vickers, “The Lord’s Supper,” 334.

⁴⁴ Vickers, “The Lord’s Supper,” 335 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ This role of the Holy Spirit in the Supper was emphasized by Calvin in the Reformation as a way to counter the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. As Block concisely explains, “According to John Calvin, Christ is present in the Lord’s Supper, though neither bodily nor physically. Contrary to the Roman Catholic view, when we partake of the elements, we do not actually eat the body and drink the blood of Christ” (*For the Glory of God*, 160).

⁴⁶ Dockery, “The Church, Worship, and the Lord’s Supper,” 48.

on God’s Spirit to create the spiritual communion between God and believers it depicts.”⁴⁷ Block adds, bringing together both the necessary human condition and the divine initiative, that, “[Christ’s spiritual presence] is not experienced automatically; faith and openness to the work of the Spirit are prerequisites to the spiritually energizing work of Christ.”⁴⁸ In sum, just as recent Baptists have gone beyond an understanding of the Lord’s Supper as a mere memorial and come to see the bread and cup as a symbolic form of proclamation, some have also embraced the conviction that Christ (in some way) is spiritually present at the Table.⁴⁹

As Communion with Other Believers

As shown above, Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 10 and instructions in 1 Cor 11 make it clear that the Lord’s Supper also serves as a time of communion with Christ’s church. We participate as “one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). This Pauline emphasis has been echoed by several Baptist authors. Millard Erickson states that “the Lord’s Supper is as much a symbol of the present vital fellowship of believers with the Lord and with one another as it is a symbol of the past death of Jesus.”⁵⁰ Vickers further explains that Jesus “is present in and with His people at all times, but the Supper affords a special glimpse into that reality as believers indwelt by the same Spirit, having the same baptism, commune together, confessing the same Lord and Savior.”⁵¹

Just as the Supper at Corinth was fraught with relational conflict that

⁴⁷ Mark E. Dever, “The Church,” in *A Theology for the Church*, 2nd ed., rev. and expanded, ed. Daniel L. Akin, Kenneth D. Keathley, and Keith Whitfield (B&H Academic, 2026), 993.

⁴⁸ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 160.

⁴⁹ While defending a historic Baptist understanding of Christ’s being present at the Supper in “a real spiritual sense,” Dockery makes the important clarification that “This in no way is to affirm the Roman Catholic position of transubstantiation or the Lutheran position of consubstantiation. But it is to borrow from the best of thought found in Zwingli and Calvin as well as our Baptist forefathers” (“The Church, Worship, and the Lord’s Supper,” 48). Recent Baptist advocacy for the spiritual presence of Christ at the Supper (by the work of the Holy Spirit) reclaims an emphasis that goes back to seventeenth-century Baptists (see above on the Second London Confession) and is in line with the views of the nineteenth-century Baptist “Prince of Preachers” C. H. Spurgeon (1834–1892). Spurgeon even penned a hymn titled “Jesu’s Presence Delightful” that, according to Haykin, “is quite remarkable for a late nineteenth-century Baptist author, for the vast majority of Baptist leaders in that era held that the Supper was a time of remembrance, nothing more” (*Amidst Us Our Belovèd Stands*, 6).

⁵⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1037.

⁵¹ Vickers, “The Lord’s Supper,” 337.

Paul needed to address, recent Baptist authors recommend an approach to the Supper that encourages reconciliation among brothers and sisters in Christ. For example, Hammett explains that “the self-examination called for [by Paul] is not general, calling on us to look over our lives for the past week or months, and confess any minute sin that might render us unworthy, but to detect ‘broken relationships, division-causing behavior, disrespect, and mistreatment of brothers and sisters in Christ.’”⁵² Thus, true Christian communion entails regular conversations between believers to admit that hurtful words have been said and harmful wrongs have been done towards one another (following the procedure Jesus taught in Matt 18:15–20). In anticipation of the meal that symbolizes such communion, the hope is that these reconciling conversations will take place. And, in the act of partaking together, “Christ’s people . . . renew their communion with one another; confession is made, and forgiveness is visually and bodily proclaimed and received.”⁵³

Implications for Renewed Practice

The sections above have demonstrated that the Pauline emphases on remembrance, proclamation, and communion in the Lord’s Supper can be found in historic Baptist statements of faith and more recent theological writings. While the memorial aspect of the Supper has remained prominent, clearer explanations of the proclamatory nature of the rite and fresh convictions regarding the presence of Christ at the Supper have emerged, along with an appreciation of the communal nature of the Supper among fellow Christians.

In this last section, implications of the Pauline emphases (as understood by Baptist theologians) will be suggested to inform a renewed practice of the Lord’s Supper in churches today. These implications will be organized under the three emphases (remembrance, proclamation, and communion) and further supported by Baptist authors.

Practicing Remembrance

The Lord’s Supper should be thoughtfully planned and prepared. In section one, the Supper was identified as an act of intentional remembrance done in response to Christ’s command. Therefore, it should not be observed in a thoughtless way. Individually, this relates to the instructions to “examine”

⁵² Hammett, *40 Questions About Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, 173. Here Hammett is quoting from Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John Feinberg (Crossway, 2012), 406–7.

⁵³ Emerson and Stamps, *The Baptist Vision*, 43.

ourselves (1 Cor 11:28) and properly “discern” the body (1 Cor 11:29). For pastors and others with leadership responsibilities over corporate worship services, this requires thoughtful planning and preparations so that all those participating may be encouraged to remember Christ in a worthy manner.⁵⁴

Autonomous Baptist churches—being without external authority or a mandated liturgy—are free to craft services that follow James Leo Garrett’s call for “the structuring of the order of worship so that the Supper can be more meaningfully observed.”⁵⁵ When the Supper is observed, great attention should be given to the other elements of the service, including the songs that are sung, the prayers that are prayed, the Scriptures that are read, and the sermon that is preached, as well as the order in which they are practiced. In this way, the Supper can become, as Emerson and Stamps envision, “the culmination of what has been sung, prayed, read, and preached thus far in corporate worship.”⁵⁶

If Christ-centered and Scripture-saturated elements of worship have all been thoughtfully prepared and placed in the order of service, the Supper may then follow the preaching of the Word. Considering the biblical rhythm of revelation and response,⁵⁷ worship planners may therefore employ the Lord’s Supper as the primary response to God’s Word in the service. Instead of closing the service with an adaptation of a nineteenth-century evangelistic strategy from revival meetings, Baptist churches may consider enacting the sacred meal that Christ instituted for the church. As Ray Van Neste suggests, “Rather than an altar call, it is a Table call, allowing each of us, in a sense, to rededicate ourselves each week.”⁵⁸

The Lord’s Supper should be observed with fitting frequency. Since Jesus commanded us to “do this,” churches should not neglect the Lord’s Supper. But how frequently should we partake?

⁵⁴ As Ciampa and Rosner emphasize, “the identity of the meal cannot be distinguished from the manner in which it is carried out” (*The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 545).

⁵⁵ James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Wipf & Stock, 2014), 675.

⁵⁶ Emerson and Stamps, *The Baptist Vision*, 43.

⁵⁷ For worship planning strategies related to “the rhythm of revelation and response,” see Joseph R. Crider, *Scripture-Guided Worship: A Call to Pastors and Worship Leaders* (Seminary Hill Press, 2024), 83–95.

⁵⁸ Ray Van Neste, “The Lord’s Supper in the Context of the Local Church,” in *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford [B&H Academic, 2010], 388. On the evangelical value of the Supper for unbelievers, see below.

Among Baptists in America, quarterly observances have been common, although not universal.⁵⁹ However, Baptist scholars giving attention to NT evidence conclude that quarterly observance of the Supper is not frequent enough, if we are seeking to follow the model of the early church. Based on Acts 2:42 and 20:7, Van Neste affirms “a clear pattern of weekly observance in the NT.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, regarding the church at Corinth, he argues that “the fact that abuse of the Lord’s Supper was such a problem in Corinth strongly suggests the Supper was held frequently. Could it have been such a problem if it only occurred quarterly?”⁶¹ Hamilton agrees, noting that:

From what Paul says in 1 Cor 11:17–34, it seems that the church partook of the Lord’s Supper when they “came together,” and from 1 Cor 16:2, it seems that the Corinthian church “came together” on the first day of the week. When combined with a text like Acts 20:7, which indicates that Paul’s practice was to celebrate the Lord’s Supper with the church when it gathered for worship on

⁵⁹ As Gregory A. Wills notes regarding Baptists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: “Baptists differed . . . on the frequency of observing Communion. Most churches observed the ceremony once per quarter, a smaller number observed it once per month, and a few observed it weekly” (“Sounds from Baptist History,” in *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford [B&H Academic, 2010], 288–89). A LifeWay Research survey confirms that quarterly practice was still the norm as recently as 2012, when 57% of SBC pastors surveyed report a quarterly observance. “Lifeway Surveys Lord’s Supper Practices of SBC Churches,” *LifeWay Research*, September 17, 2012, <https://research.lifeway.com/2012/09/17/lifeway-surveys-lords-supper-practices-of-sbc-churches/>.

⁶⁰ Van Neste, “The Lord’s Supper in the Context of the Local Church,” 370. Nevertheless, Van Neste is quick to add that, “As is commonly noted, there is no specific command given on how frequently we ought to celebrate Communion” (p. 370). But he is “convinced that our churches will benefit from celebrating Communion more, rather than less, often” (p. 370).

⁶¹ Van Neste, “The Lord’s Supper in the Context of the Local Church,” 371. He adds, “[Though they] were abusing the Supper, their practice (which was not considered odd by Paul) was to celebrate each time they gathered. Even the wording in 11:25, ‘As often as you drink it,’ which is often used to suggest frequency is unimportant, in context actually suggests a frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper” (p. 372).

the first day of the week, this seems to be the early church’s practice.⁶²

Block affirms this conviction, adding that “It seems the New Testament ideal of a weekly observance is the most honoring to the Lord and the most spiritually rejuvenating for his people.”⁶³

Recent writings suggest that some Baptist churches have begun to partake of the Supper more often. Writing in 2025, Emerson and Stamps testify that “churches are beginning to see the benefit of more regular observance of Communion (monthly or even weekly).”⁶⁴ Likewise, Ford and Wilhite (in another 2025 publication) “advocate for a weekly observance of the Supper because we cannot have enough reminders of Christ’s work for us.”⁶⁵ Since we often forget, we ought to remember the Lord through partaking of the Lord’s Supper more frequently.

Practicing Proclamation

Our practice of the Lord’s Supper should display the gospel through carefully selected words and symbols. Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians confirm that the Lord’s Supper is to be a perpetual proclamation to believers and unbelievers.⁶⁶ Although the Supper often serves as a means of response in the service, it still retains its function as proclamation. It should be considered part of the church’s faithful witness of the gospel—not apart from the ministry of the Word but complementing the preaching and speaking truth through sacred symbols and ritual actions. Notwithstanding clear presentations of the gospel can and should occur throughout the service in many ways (sermons and songs, testimonies and exhortations), practicing the Lord’s Supper on a frequent basis should ensure that the gospel is

⁶² Hamilton, “The Lord’s Supper in Paul,” 100–101. See also Hammett, *40 Questions About Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, Question 36, “How Often Should the Lord’s Supper Be Observed?”

⁶³ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 166–67. Block also counters the argument that “since First Testament roots of the Lord’s Supper are found in the annual Passover, the Eucharist should be celebrated only once a year, perhaps on Maundy Thursday” by contending that “the Lord’s Supper is more than a Christian Passover: it also incorporates traditions of covenant ratification and sacrifice for sin” (p. 382n54).

⁶⁴ Emerson and Stamps, *The Baptist Vision*, 54.

⁶⁵ Ford and Wilhite, *Nicaea for Today*, 85.

⁶⁶ After addressing the practice of the Supper in 1 Cor 11 and the use of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 12–14, Paul reiterates the gospel message in 1 Cor 15:1–4. Just as he had to remind the Corinthians of the “words of institution,” he begins chapter 15 by stating “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you” (v. 1).

displayed through this Christ-ordained means.

Although particular words for the ordinance are not prescribed in the NT, some form of the words of institution (from 1 Cor 11 or the Gospels) will make the origins of the rite and its gospel significance clear.⁶⁷ Furthermore, other biblical words and phrases can be used to explain the Supper, perhaps beginning with Paul's own words in 1 Cor (e.g., 1 Cor 5:7; 10:16–17). But additional teaching that further explains the Supper (as appropriate for each service and in line with sermon themes or applications) should also be prepared and delivered. In this way, the Christian message of salvation is verbally preached, and those that hear the message may more likely partake in faith (cf. Rom 10:14–17).

As the symbol of bread represents both the unified church of Christ and the body of Jesus broken for sinners, pastors may make use of a common loaf at the table (even if larger congregations necessitate small wafers for the distribution). While reciting the words of institution, the pastor can break the loaf, just as Jesus “broke it, and said ‘This is my body’” (1 Cor 11:24). The symbol of the cup also has multiple interconnected meanings, summarized by Jesus as “the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor 11:25). Whether juice or wine is used, the connection with Jesus's shed blood on the cross should be evident.

Our practice of the Lord's Supper should proclaim the gospel with evangelistic awareness. The Lord's Supper, while typically partaken of only by believers,⁶⁸ may serve as a powerful proclamation to unbelievers. The gospel

⁶⁷ As Emerson and Stamps encourage, “the Lord's Supper is ... necessarily accompanied by the verbally proclaimed words of institution (“This is my body,” etc.)” (*The Baptist Vision*, 43).

⁶⁸ Who can (or should) receive the Lord's Supper? Due to the common prerequisite of baptism for those intending to partake, and the Baptist commitment to believer's baptism, this question has been given extensive attention in Baptist literature. Since at least the seventeenth century, Baptists have debated whether this means that they should not offer the Supper to those that trust in Christ but were baptized as infants. In addition, Baptist commitments to local church discipline have led some churches to only offer the ordinance to local church members, a position sometimes referred to as “closed” communion. In contemporary practice, many Baptist churches seem more comfortable with “close” communion, allowing for believers of “like-minded” or “gospel-preaching” churches to also partake. While most conservative Baptists would not advocate for “open” communion, where anyone who so desires may partake, in practice few churches “fence the Table” sufficiently to prevent such. For a historical view on Baptist views, terminology, and practices, see Wills, “Sounds from Baptist History,” 287–312. Regarding more recent perspectives, see Hammett, *40 Questions About Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, Questions 32 and 33, “Who May Properly Partake of the Lord's Supper? (Parts 1 and 2).

words and symbols used (as addressed above) speak of Christ's death for sinners. Thus, the regular practice of the Supper may itself be an evangelistic witness. As Van Neste describes the experience: “An unbeliever sitting in the service will have heard the gospel expounded and will have been called to repent and believe. The elements will have been explained with a call to repent and believe but a warning that if he does not repent and believe, then the elements are not for him.”⁶⁹ Pastors should be aware of unbelievers in their midst and lead the Lord's Supper with the same evangelistic mindset as they have when preaching. Thus, practicing the Supper becomes a means of faithful witness to both believers and unbelievers.⁷⁰

Practicing Communion

The Lord's Supper should be taken with confession of sin and assurance of faith. Paul's instructions for the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11, along with his related comments in 1 Cor 10, identify the practice as an experience of true communion with Christ and others. Therefore, in preparing to commune with Christ at the Lord's Supper, believers should be given opportunities to confess their sins (privately) and profess their faith (either privately or corporately).

Multiple Scripture passages point to the need for confession of known sin for continued communion with God (e.g., Pss 32; 51; 130; Matt 6:12, 14–15; Luke 11:4; Heb 4:16; Jas 5:13–16; 1 John 1:9). Paradigmatically, Isa 6 depicts the prophet Isaiah being confronted by the thrice-holy nature of “the LORD of hosts” (v. 3). He responds with these words of confession: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (v. 5). As it was for Isaiah, the prophet of the Lord, so it is for Christians today—we are “lost” and “unclean” and in need of atonement for our sin (v. 7) through our Lord Jesus Christ (1

⁶⁹ Van Neste, “The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church,” 389. The BF&M article on “Evangelism and Missions” (mentioned above) articulates the Southern Baptist commitment for “every follower of Christ” and “every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to endeavor to make disciples of all nations.” This is accomplished “by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ.” Surely the Lord's Supper, practiced by local churches according to biblical principles, should be a method “in harmony with the gospel of Christ” for the purposes of reaching the lost.

⁷⁰ This relates again to the issue of frequency (discussed above): As there is an urgent need for witness “until he comes,” the Supper should be practiced as a perpetual gospel proclamation.

Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:18–21; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14, 22; Heb 9:12–14; 1 Pet 2:24–25).⁷¹

Confession of sin can take place earlier in the service through quiet times of personal prayer, the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9–13) prayed together, or a time of guided prayer with prompts such as "At this moment, examine your life and attitudes for personal sin" and "Ask yourself, are you persisting in faith in Jesus Christ, trusting him to forgive your sins?" Songs of faith or the recitation of a corporate creed ("We believe ...") provide ways for the congregation to reaffirm their belief in Christ.

When the scheduled date for the Supper is communicated beforehand or it is practiced according to a predictable schedule, local church partakers can also have times of self-examination on their own during the week. Such times may lead those experiencing conflict to have reconciling conversations with other believers, followed by joyful times of taking the Supper together.⁷²

An important truth must be kept in mind regarding self-examination: At the Lord's Supper, the only worthy receivers are those who realize and confess their own unworthiness. Therefore, repentant believers seeking to love God and neighbor need not fear Paul's warning about partaking in an unworthy manner. As Van Neste explains, "The warning does not apply to those who are struggling with sin but are looking to the cross in repentance, hating their sin and yearning to be pleasing to God."⁷³ Repentant believers should recognize that they have already been made worthy by Christ's perfect worth. Vickers provides these comforting words for the repentant believer who is hesitant to partake: "You are exactly right. You are not worthy. But Christ is, and His body and blood, broken and shed for you, make you worthy and by faith He abides with you. Now come, confess and repent of your sins and proclaim His death until He comes."⁷⁴ Sinners recognizing their need for Christ are invited to the Lord's Table to partake.

In addition, individual believers should remain aware of other believers around them. Instead of always looking down (introspectively), they

⁷¹ For recent thoughts on "liturgical confession" from an evangelical perspective, including commentary on Isa 6 and other passages, see Braden Joseph McKinley, "Rehearsing our Redemption: How Liturgical Confession Shapes Our Life in the Gospel" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023).

⁷² Practiced in this way, more frequent observances of the Supper can be seen as the opportunity to live in closer fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ on a week-to-week basis.

⁷³ Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," 386.

⁷⁴ Vickers, "The Lord's Supper," 340.

can be encouraged to look around at the church, the body of Christ.

The Lord's Supper should be practiced when and where the church gathers for corporate worship. Although other places may seem meaningful to practice the Supper, such as at a retreat with a church small group (a smaller segment of the gathered church) or at a multi-church conference or seminary chapel (a broader gathering of Christians), the most appropriate time and place for the ordinance to take place is during the regular gathering of the local church.

With respect to the post-pandemic technological context, this implication has ramifications for online worship services. Should pastors invite those watching an online service to partake in the Supper along with those there in the building? Does it matter whether this occurs at the same time, or sometime later? Does it matter whether the person watching is by themselves, or with other members of the church (such as their own family members)?

Paul's emphasis on shared participation in the body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16–17) and clear instructions to "wait for one another" (1 Cor 11:33) speak directly to these issues. Although allowing for temporary solutions to unusual circumstances (such as a pandemic), churches should be careful not to encourage online participation—or anything else that limits the communal aspect of the communion—as a regular practice. As Van Neste reminds us, "In the Scriptures, Communion is part of the gathered worship. It is not merely a private act."⁷⁵ Therefore, "We are to take this as a church together. Anything which allows us to consider ourselves alone, apart from the rest of the body, seems to fly in the face of the unity called for in 1 Corinthians 11."⁷⁶ We are not to take the Supper alone, at our own convenience. The Supper should be a manifestation of our unity in Christ.

Conclusion

Emerging from the pandemic, many "liturgical" churches (such as the Catholics, Episcopalians, and Lutherans) immediately returned to their

⁷⁵ Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," 376.

⁷⁶ Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," 378. With regard to elderly believers in homebound or facility care who are physically unable to participate when and where the church gathers, pastoral wisdom should guide efforts to facilitate their continued observance of the Lord's Supper with their local church while holding to the biblical significance of the rite as a communal practice. For further discussion, see Van Neste, "The Lord's Supper in the Context of the Local Church," 376–78; and Hammett, *40 Questions About Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, Question 4, "Are Baptism and the Lord's Supper Only for Churches?"

weekly eucharistic observances. Baptist churches also resumed their weekly worship gatherings, some with a renewed sense of the significance and potential for taking the Lord's Supper together.

As Baptist pastors and leaders continue to study and reflect on the Lord's Supper for current practice, they may come to conclusions such as those reflected above, reclaiming Baptist theological emphases from the past and joining the chorus of recent voices. Overall, they may be convicted to ask their congregations, "If one of the central acts of worship in the New Testament is corporate celebration of the Lord's Supper, should we not give it greater attention? ... Should our practice be done more faithfully and regularly?"⁷⁷

By revisiting Paul's instructions for the Lord's Supper (based on Christ's commands delivered to the apostle), pastors will find the biblical guidance needed to practice this sacred meal "more faithfully and regularly." With the help of other church leaders and carefully planned services, they can then lead their congregations in observing the Supper as a time of remembrance, vividly engaging in the story of Christ's sacrificial death. They can practice the Supper as an act of faithful gospel witness, making clear through words, bread, and a cup that Jesus is risen and will return. And together their churches can experience communion with Christ as well as one another in a way that renews faith and heals divisions. When practiced with fitting frequency as part of regular gatherings of corporate worship, the Lord's Supper can serve as the sacred symbol of what it was intended to signify, becoming a time of rich remembrance, perpetual proclamation, and manifest unity.

⁷⁷ Dockery, "The Church, Worship, and the Lord's Supper," 49.

Interview with J. Ligon Duncan III

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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.

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Book Reviews

Duane A. Garrett. *Job*. Evangelical Exegetical Commentary. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2024. xviii + 664 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1683597582. \$62.99.

Job is one of the most fascinating and complex books of the Bible. Its theological and philosophical questions have made it one of the most commented upon, and its Hebrew is a challenge even for the most advanced experts. In the Spanish language context, for example, it was one of the most popular biblical books during the medieval period and at the onset of the so-called “Spanish Golden Age,” where both religious and non-religious authors used it to explore the problem of suffering within different worldviews. Additionally, the literary depth of the text and its linguistic difficulties make any commentary on Job a monumental task.

Duane Garrett’s commentary addresses these challenges with an analytical approach that combines translation, exegesis, and theological reflection. Following a general introduction to the book of Job, the commentary is divided into five parts: The Prologue: Job’s Affliction; The Debate; The Wisdom Poem; The Three Great Speeches; and The Epilogue: Job’s Vindication. This division reflects Garrett’s proposed chiasmic structure of the book (pp. 1–2), with chapter 28 (“The Wisdom Poem”) serving as the center. He believes this chapter represents the voice of the poet-author of the book, not that of Job or his friends (p. 353).

The introduction to the commentary is clear and well structured. Here Garrett summarizes the central debate in Job on theodicy and warns Christian readers about the difficulty of reconciling Job’s innocence with their “all have sinned” theology (p. 41). His observations on the intertextual relationship of Job to other books of the Bible (pp. 7–14) and his proposals on the dating of the book based on these relationships are notable. In addition, he offers a good analysis of the unity and integrity of the text (pp. 16–20) in which his proposals for reorganizing the book differ from those of other scholars. In any event, he makes the cogent point that reorganizing the book’s structure does not address or resolve the inherent complexities associated with it. His suggestion that the text may be included within the “apocalyptic” genre (p. 26) is questionable though and should not occupy such a prominent place in the introduction. Similarly, the section on biblical parallels in the introduction, while valuable, over-

laps with intertextuality, and the distinction between the two remains unclear.

The commentary follows a structure typically beginning with a general introduction to each passage, outlining its thematic units. These units are then analyzed, and, after a brief introduction, some textual notes are given, if necessary, followed by the translation, exegetical comments, and biblical theological reflections. Garrett also includes sections of application and devotional implications at the end of each passage’s analysis, a feature that adds practical value for readers. However, the placement of textual notes before the translation is problematic, since it leads to unnecessary confusion for readers who lack the contextual framework provided by the translation or the text in the original language. This issue appears to be an editorial inconsistency though, because it counters Garrett’s stated methodology which places translation before textual notes (p. 46). Moreover, that sequence is observed only in the first thematic unit (Job 1:1–5) but is abandoned thereafter.

Most of the commentary on individual verses tends to be brief, which could limit the depth of analysis. However, one of the strengths of the commentary is the attention it gives to difficult, obscure words and hapax legomena, reflecting the linguistic challenges of Job. Some verse translations seem unnecessarily long though. While Job is a great challenge for any translator, Garrett does not appear to follow a specific translation style; it is sometimes hard to distinguish whether we are facing a functional equivalence translation or a paraphrase. Additionally, specific problems include the following: The translation of גִּבּוֹר as “warrior” in Job 3:3 is misleading. In Job 19:19 he translates וְזָה-אֶהְיֶה לִּי נֶהְפְּכוּ-בִי as “And I love this man! They have turned against me.” He probably considers that זֶה is a singular demonstrative, but the translation feels forced in the context of the verse. Then, in Job 42:6, וְנִחַמְתִּי עַל-עָפָר וְאֵפֶר, is translated as “And I change my mind concerning dust and ashes.” This does not make sense. A more plausible translation is Edward Greenstein’s “I take pity on dust and ashes!” or simply, “I recant and relent over dust and ashes.” Another example is Job 12:2 (p. 186), where his decision diminishes the weight of the phrase and strips away part of the irony inherent in the Hebrew text.

The analysis of Elihu’s speeches is helpful but is not without its inaccuracies (p. 414). For Garrett he is an arrogant young man, but I understand the author of Job to skillfully portray a young man who makes all the mistakes that an intelligent, passionate, and inexperienced young person would make in front of a group of older, experienced men. Finally, the introduction to the divine speeches (chaps. 38–42) is surprisingly brief, especially considering the lengthy introductions offered in other

sections, such as Job 28 and the speeches of Elihu.

In any event, Garrett concludes his commentary with an insightful reflection: the accuser

was wrong to think that the fear of God is no more than a prosperity gospel, [but] it is also wrong to think that God desires his people to be in a state of permanent affliction, or even to suppose that God's decision to bless or afflict are arbitrary, having no more purpose than blind luck. (p. 580)

Together with the other closing comments, this reflects a profound consideration of Job's innocence and divine purpose, offering a balanced view of the problem of pain.

Despite some debatable translation choices and too-brief treatment of certain topics, Garrett's commentary is a notable contribution to the study of Job. It offers detailed linguistic analysis and effectively links interpretation with theology, making it a helpful resource for those wishing to delve into this complex biblical book.

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James M. Hamilton Jr. and Matthew Damico. *Reading the Psalms as Scripture*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2024. iv + 152 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1683597766. \$19.99.

This work by James Hamilton and Matthew Damico strives to present an accessible and coherent approach to reading the Psalter as Scripture. Their case is presented at the popular level and represents the overflow of Hamilton's work on the Psalms in the Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary series. The combined authorial insights represent pastorally rich and biblically saturated ideas that are meant to serve the Church, from two men committed to caring for their local church.

The primary argument of *Reading the Psalms* is that the Psalter, rather than a "haphazard collection," is an "intentionally arranged anthology" (p. 4). They defend this argument chapter-by-chapter from the level of individual Psalms and their contents up to the relationships between the five books of the Psalter to show how the books form an "impressionistic metanarrative" that was appropriated by the biblical authors (p. 53).

Reading the Psalms contains an introduction, nine chapters, and a review of seven theses that summarize the authors' argument regarding the intentional craftsmanship of the Psalter. After the introduction, the chapters progress through the topics of the Psalms as a book, superscriptions,

individual compositions, the structure of the Psalter, intertextuality, messianic typology, and singing psalms. While the argument is built intentionally and reflects intense, scholarly study, footnotes are sparse, and the authors' case moves forward with minimal repetition and virtually no engagement with counterpoints. However, the argument is clear and the content is rich.

The work has many merits. As mentioned, a noticeable strength is the straightforward and distilled presentation of the material at an accessible level. For example, the chapter discussing the structure of the Psalter provides a clear explanation of its organization, how the doxologies and superscriptions reflect the author's intent, and leaves the reader with an awareness of the "impressionistic narrative." To increase the work's usefulness to the Church, *Reading the Psalms* is rife with practical implications and local-church applications of the preceding material (e.g., an entire chapter dedicated to singing). Many chapters conclude with application-oriented discussions rather than delaying discussions to a closing chapter, a feature that serves practitioners (e.g., pp. 77, 103).

Though the book is brief, the reader gains a clearer sense of the Psalms' integrity within themselves and the larger canon of Scripture, along with how reading the Psalms as argued should begin to impact modern Christians. However, this same brevity produces some minor challenges: Terms fundamental to the authors' argument are left undefined (e.g., "impressionistic"), and some aspects of hermeneutics are generally assumed rather than grounded or defended (e.g., typology). Some explicit sense of these authorial particularities on topics fundamental to their argument would at least show the audience "their cards," in a good-natured way, allowing convinced readers to grow and further apply these same principles elsewhere. Also, unexposed laity are likely to leave these brief descriptions believing there is consensus where there is not. Finally, the fundamental structure of Hamilton and Damico's approach is unquestionably framed around the superscriptions within the book of Psalms. They briefly defend the superscriptions' inspiration and legitimacy but considering how integral they are to the approach advocated, more discussion is warranted, especially given the lack of scholarly consensus on the issue (pp. 27–29).

Notwithstanding such minor deficiencies, *Reading the Psalms* is well worth the investment for pastors and laity who generally desire to reap the benefits of the Psalms at a high level without struggling through a lengthy, critical commentary. This book serves as a helpful companion to both average Bible study and more critical research because it encourages readers to maintain a view of the forest while exploring the trees. In sum, Hamilton and Damico have produced a helpful work by and for the

Church.

Dustin Atchley
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John H. Walton. *The Lost World of the Prophets: Old Testament Prophecy and Apocalyptic Literature in Ancient Context*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2024. 183 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1514004890. \$22.00.

John H. Walton provides another installment to his *Lost World* series with this volume focusing on prophecy in the Old Testament. The typical structure of these books is to list a series of propositions through which Walton attempts to reconstruct the world lost to his readers. In this installment, he helps them recover the biblical world of prophecy. The work contains sixteen propositions related to prophecy in the Old Testament, organized around five major movements: prophecy in the ancient Near East; the institution of prophecy; the literature of prophecy; methodological and interpretive issues; and apocalyptic. His concluding chapter provides a strategy for reading prophecy.

Walton argues that the modern church focuses its interpretation along two main ideas and therefore loses the message of the prophets in the process. The first idea arises when “prophecy is studied with a focus on eschatology—the shape and sequence of the end times” (p. 2). The second idea occurs when “prophecy is used for the purposes of apologetics, most commonly to prove that Jesus is God” (p. 3). Thus, these two foci see “fulfillment as the message” (p. 3).

Walton proposes that the intent of the author is central to understanding God’s message today. This intent is lost when interpretation primarily focuses on eschatology and fulfillment. He suggests that the way to recover the message of the prophets is to set them in their literary, historical, theological, and cultural milieu. Understanding this fourfold context can help the reader of prophecy establish the intent of God’s message to its original audience, and for us too. From this, all sixteen propositions flow to help the reader understand the original setting of the prophetic authors and therefore hear God’s word to us.

Overall, Walton’s book serves as a good introduction into the world of biblical prophecy for the uninitiated. His work acquaints the reader with the concept of prophecy in the ancient Near Eastern environment. Since his book is intended for people within the church, it is important to note that he is not saying that OT prophecy is just like its ancient Near Eastern counterparts though. He explains:

As always, [my] approach is not going to assume that the people

of Israel thought exactly the same as their neighbors, but that broader context should be the default. That is, if the Bible does not demonstrate a distinctiveness on a particular point, it is more likely that the Israelites thought like those around them more than that they thought like we do. (p. 19)

By saying this, he both clarifies the distinctiveness of OT prophecy and demonstrates its shared cultural backdrop. Understanding prophecy in its original context, he argues, helps avoid over-interpreting the prophet’s message.

For Walton, the message of the prophet is not the same as fulfillment. This is, perhaps, the aspect of the book that will most likely provoke push-back from a church audience. However, this resistance may stem from misunderstanding his intent. He warns against merely interpreting a prediction that has been fulfilled, especially regarding passages that are often labeled Messianic. He gives attention to several examples, most notably Mic 5:2 (Matt 2:6, “And you Bethlehem in the land of Judah”), and Hos 11:1 (Matt 2:15, “Out of Egypt I called my Son”). Some may misread him as dismissing their Messianic nature. However, he wants to distinguish the prophet’s message for his immediate audience in contrast to our modern concept of Messianic fulfillment.

Moreover, Walton wants to avoid a minimalistic approach, by which “only the fulfillments that are cited in the New Testament are considered credible” Messianic prophecies (p. 110). He also eschews the opposite—of seeing Messianic prophecies on every page. He elucidates,

We can see that the New Testament shows much more interest in revealing fulfillment than in a text-in-context interpretation of the Old Testament prophets. This does not subordinate the fulfillment, nor does it undervalue the contributions of the New Testament. I only suggest that we need to recognize the different tasks that they have. (p. 115)

In other words, he affirms the value of both the OT and NT contexts, emphasizing the importance of interpreting each on its own terms—a welcome concept for this reviewer.

There is much lacking in Walton’s work in terms of interaction with more critical issues related to prophecy, apocalyptic literature, and the use of the OT in the New Testament. But his work is clearly intended for a more popular audience rather than an academic one. He stays well within the bounds he has set for his intended readership. Some may criticize his

exclusion of critical discussions, but those would have resulted in a fundamentally different work, aimed at a different audience.

Dougald McLaurin III
Pineville, Louisiana

Tremper Longman III. *The Old Testament as Literature: Foundations for Christian Interpretation*. Approaching the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024. xii + 292 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1540961310. \$34.99.

This volume is the first in Baker Academic's new series, *Approaching the Old Testament*. Subsequent volumes, still under development, will address the OT and history, and OT theology. Tremper Longman III presents himself as a biblical scholar, rather than a literature expert, but this first book provides tools for a reflective literary exploration of the Hebrew Bible and integrates brief historical surveys with expositions of current interpretive trends. The book is structured into three parts, covering Literary Theory and the Conventions of Biblical Narrative and Poetry, an Analysis of Illustrative Prose-Narrative Texts, and an Analysis of Illustrative Poetic Texts.

Longman affirms the Bible as the Word of God and asserts that biblical interpretation must focus not only on the voices of human authors but also on the voice of the Divine Author (p. 2). The literary shape of the text aids the reader in understanding the author's intent, and he implies that literary genre is an integral part of divine inspiration (which is key to understanding the meaning of the text, p. 26).

The first part begins with a presentation of the dynamics between author, text, and reader (Chapter 1), raising questions about the necessity of knowing the author's identity to interpret the text (p. 10). While Longman's exploration of the text-reader relationship is interesting, his generalizations about the influence of factors such as age, gender, or ethnicity on reader perception, lack contextual depth. For instance, in Caribbean or Indigenous contexts, biblical theological readings are mostly shaped by meanings imposed during the first missionary campaigns, not by ethnic, environmental, or gender factors.

Chapter 2, one of the most valuable, traces a journey from the historical-critical method to ideological interpretations, and explores the current landscape of literary studies of the OT. Chapter 3 examines literary genres as tools for interpretation, briefly focusing on the history of genre scholarship in biblical studies. A notable shortcoming here is the author's decision to start genre analysis by using a psalm, without first grounding the

discussion with examples from modern or contemporary literature. Although this is addressed in later chapters, in-depth exploration of specific genres along with their characteristics is initially lacking. In any event, chapter 4 analyzes "narrative prose" as a genre, presenting a historical overview of narratology, tracing the literary journey from author to reader, and then analyzing this genre within the biblical corpus. The section on "focalization" is one of the best contributions in this chapter, offering a brief yet thorough summary of the term and its use in narrative theory.

Chapter 5 introduces biblical poetry with an approach accessible even to readers new to the subject. However, one problematic aspect of Longman's methodology is his asserted "emphasis on the semantic level, the level of meaning" (p. 107). He seeks to distinguish between structures (which he calls "levels") that are syntactic, poetic, and semantic. While distinctions between the first two are traditional, semantics is present in both. Thus, the idea of a "semantic level" is confusing, since meaning permeates the entire structure. Chapter 6 enriches the analysis though, by defining and providing examples of intertextuality within the books of the OT, equipping readers with tools for personal research.

Longman then transitions to the second part, focusing on prose-narrative analysis, with examples from the Torah (chapter 7) and the historical books (chapter 8). Here he addresses theological challenges with poise but sometimes reads too much in the text.

Finally, the third part analyzes poetry in the psalms (chapter 9), wisdom literature (chapter 10) and epic poetry, including poetic passages in the prophetic books (chapter 11). In this section, Longman's use of a consistent structure (genre, poetics, and voice) facilitates comprehension and application of the analytical principles—a feature that would have been helpful in the second part as well. His analysis highlights the literary and theological richness of poetic texts, though some sections would benefit from greater contextual depth.

In sum, *The Old Testament as Literature* provides a good foundation for those beginning to study the Hebrew Bible from a literary perspective. However, it also presents certain weaknesses. First, it does not apply exercises in literary analysis to non-biblical texts before addressing the OT. This would have facilitated a more natural transition, and it is precisely the criticism made by C. S. Lewis, which Longman himself cites: "If [a critic] tells me that something in the Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read" (p. 25). Second, there are some conceptual errors. For example, classifying Gen 1–11 under the genre "figurative depiction of a historical event" (chapter 7) does not align with any recognized literary genres. Similarly, his definition of

plot as “discourse” is problematic. Third, his “literary readings” lack conclusions. Although he justifies this decision (p. 264), readers would benefit from conclusive reflections in his analyses.

All told though, Longman’s exploration of the various ways the Bible has been studied as literature throughout history, his exposition of different literary approaches applied to the OT, and his coverage of available and relevant literature on the subject make this volume a valuable contribution.

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Jason S. DeRouchie. *Delighting in the Old Testament: Through Christ and for Christ*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2024. 368 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1433591228. \$32.99.

Most Christians typically turn to Ephesians and 2 Corinthians instead of Ecclesiastes and 2 Chronicles when given a choice for their devotional life and ministry practice. However, a pattern of neglecting the OT is unhealthy for believers because they rob themselves of three-quarters of God’s revelation of himself and his ways, and their understanding of the NT is diminished. Jason DeRouchie, Research Professor of Old Testament at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes to help readers see the vital importance of the OT for Christians today (p. xix). *Delighting in the Old Testament* is a culmination of decades of research and writing on the role of Christ in biblical interpretation (p. xxii).

In sum, DeRouchie wants “to help Christians make connections to Christ and practical application to the Christian life from every page of the Old Testament” (p. 34). Christian leaders and laypeople are his target audience. The footnotes allow advanced readers to see his influences and dive deeper into his methodology, while the practical questions at the end of each chapter are helpful for personal or small-group study.

The book has four parts, including an introduction and conclusion—which should not be skipped. His introduction gives ten reasons why the OT must not be ignored by Christians. In Part 1, “Reading Well,” DeRouchie shows how Jesus helps believers interpret the OT. He supplies readers with a biblical-theological foundation for a Christocentric interpretation of the OT. In Part 2, “Seeing Well,” he offers seven ways the biblical authors model reading the OT to envision Christ. Readers will find Chapter 6, “The Message of Genesis and the Hope of Christ,” to be a helpful case study on how to put the hermeneutical approach into practice.

In Part 3, “Hoping Well,” DeRouchie gives key principles that guided the NT writers when they claim OT assurances and show how Jesus fulfills promises by maintaining, transforming, or completing them. Taking hold of the commitments of God in Christ appropriately fuels sanctification but mishandling them leads to detrimental results. In this vein, readers will find his polemic against Prosperity Theology useful (pp. 141–51).

DeRouchie’s Part 4, “Living Well,” evaluates various perspectives on Old Covenant law and gives four case studies to show how Jesus maintains, transforms, or annuls the law. He asserts, “The Mosaic law does not *directly* bind the Christian in a legal manner, but we treat all the OT laws as profitable and instructive when we read them through the lens of Christ” (p. 193). He takes a progressive-covenantal approach to the Mosaic Law compared to a dispensational, classic covenantal, or theonomic viewpoint. Readers will be helped by his critique of general equity theonomy, recently popularized by Douglas Wilson and Jeff Durbin, and Christian Nationalism, popularized by Stephen Wolfe (pp. 219–28). He concludes the book by providing seven tips for delighting in the OT.

DeRouchie maintains a dual thesis: First, he argues the OT is Christian Scripture which God gave with Christians in mind. The faithful remnant in the OT understood many of God’s mysteries. Still, even the OT writers believed most of their words would be more meaningful for those in the Messianic age than their current generation (p. 34). Second, he argues faith in Christ alone supplies the necessary light to see and savor the OT. Consequently, Jesus’s appearance in salvation history gives us the essential lens for a complete understanding and appropriation of the divine OT author’s intended meaning (pp. 16–17).

Finally, DeRouchie persuasively advocates for a redemptive-historical, Christocentric hermeneutical approach to OT interpretation (p. 117). He describes his methodology clearly:

An approach that is *redemptive-historical* is one that accounts for how God’s work and purposes in Scripture progress, integrate, and climax in Christ, and how all faithful biblical interpretation must account for the way Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection inform and influence everything God is doing in space and time. (p. 73)

His use of the term Christocentric is loaded though. First, biblical interpretation and application must be connected to the cross to be Christian. Second, Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection inform the message of what is already in the OT, *and* the entire OT points toward its fulfillment in Christ. To be clear, DeRouchie’s redemptive-historical, Christocentric hermeneutical approach is distinct from those offered by Walter Kaiser and Abner Chou (grammatical-historical), Daniel Block (Christotelic), and Abraham Kuruvilla (Christiconic).

Do your OT hermeneutics and ministry practice align with the truth that God created all things by the Son, through the Son, and for the Son (p. 25)? Moreover, does your homiletical practice imitate the apostles' pattern of preaching Christ from all the Scriptures? Pick up DeRouchie's book to say yes as you grow in your delight of the OT and as you do it *through* and *for* Christ.

Scott Lucky
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Michael R. Licona. *Jesus, Contradicted: Why the Gospels Tell the Same Story Differently*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024. 288 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-0310159599. \$34.99.

In this volume, Michael Licona addresses the specific literary challenge that the four canonical Gospels raise when read alongside one another: Although strikingly similar in overall focus and narrative shape, they often differ in ways that call out for explanation. As he engages this issue, Licona draws upon personal experience, an apologetic framework, extensive historical research, and close textual analysis. This volume represents an accessible articulation of positions he develops at greater length and detail in his previous works.

To begin, it might be helpful to state directly that this review disputes the book's central theological thesis. Contra Licona, the nature of the differences between the Gospels does not require a substantive revision of the classical meaning of the inspiration or inerrancy of Scripture. Accordingly, this brief review's summary and comments focus on the insights of the work and their value for evangelicals who might ultimately disagree with the conclusions.

An important strength of this volume is its emphasis on intellectual honesty. Licona begins with an account of his personal disorientation when confronted with the synoptic problem for the first time (pp. 1–7). He also shares correspondence from skeptics and believers as they have wrestled with this issue (pp. 224–35). He helpfully illustrates the importance of maintaining a conceptual space for Christians to honestly grapple with textual, theological, and historical difficulties they find challenging or troubling when reading the Bible.

The goal, in this sense, is to *inoculate* believers against skeptical falsehood, not *insulate* or *isolate* them from any exposure to critical viewpoints. In this vein, Licona makes a compelling case that the truth of Christianity is not shaken by disagreement, even in theologically significant matters. As he asserts throughout the book, “If the resurrection happened, then

Christianity is true!” (pp. 6–7). This bedrock starting point provides a strong conceptual foundation for believers to stand upon as they encounter difficulties, and weigh competing theological claims. However, considering all that the biblical texts claim, I would want to say *more* than this, certainly not *less*.

Another helpful aspect of Licona's book is his ready access to the complicated synoptic problem itself. The opening chapters in particular show the likelihood of a literary relationship between the Synoptic Gospels, that each author made distinct compositional decisions, that simple harmonization cannot solve every textual tension, and that Mark's Gospel was written before the others (pp. 7–50). Additionally, a working understanding of the synoptic problem can help one when examining Gospel differences.

Historically, Licona's comparative analysis strengthens the current consensus among NT scholars that the canonical Gospels are a form of ancient biography. He asserts that readers should take more seriously “the implications of the biographical genre on our reading of the Gospels” (p. 13). Accordingly, the bulk of his work studies the features and “compositional techniques” of ancient biographers (chiefly the *Lives* of the ancient historian, Plutarch) and demonstrates that the Gospel authors use these same techniques in their own writings (pp. 82–168). His central thesis is that “many items in the Gospels become clearer when the Gospels are read through a lens that has first-century literary conventions in view” (p. 18).

Theologically, Licona interrogates key affirmations of Scripture's divine inspiration and comprehensive truthfulness. His central contention is that any view of Scripture should be consistent with what can be observed in the biblical texts (pp. 190–91). This principle, alongside his comparative historical analysis of the Gospels, drives his revision (or “fine-tuning”) of the doctrine of inspiration. He thus adopts a “flexible inerrancy” position (i.e., the overall message of Scripture is without error, but not necessarily every word).

The book is written for those who have little or no prior knowledge of the synoptic problem or the key ideas within a theology of Scripture. This emerges from the comments at the end of many chapters encouraging a reader who may feel troubled, disoriented, or uncomfortable with the basic information presented (e.g., pp. 18–19; 145–47). Such readers would not have encountered Gospel differences and would think of inspiration only in terms of strict dictation (regardless of what they've been taught). On the one hand, this feature of the book is helpful (and certainly needed in our increasingly post-Christian culture). On the other hand, though, what is often needed is not a rejection or substantive revision of

classical doctrines like inspiration or the central affirmations of inerrancy but rather the *articulation* and *clarification* of these theological claims. Most evangelical proponents of these doctrines teach neither a dictation theory of inspiration nor a view of inerrancy that cannot account for textual features like awkward grammar or particularities of genre expectations.

In any event, Licona's work deepens many historical insights on the Gospels as a form of ancient biography. His book is also a model of accessible writing to a broad audience. Even if one is not as optimistic about the explanatory power of biographical devices nor as pessimistic about the value of any kind of reasoned harmonization, there is much in this work that is useful for studying the four Gospels.

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Thomas R. Schreiner. *Christ Crucified: A Theology of Galatians*. New Testament Theology. Wheaton: Crossway, 2024. xv + 158 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1433581304. \$24.99.

The New Testament Theology series fills a literary space between traditional commentaries and expositional studies. The series addresses each NT book's theological contributions while incorporating the historical background and literary connections within the book, the author's corpus, and the entire biblical canon. Thomas Schreiner's work on Galatians does not veer too far into background details nor falter into academic minutia when addressing debated matters. Rather, this monograph excellently links academic interest in biblical history and inquiry with the theological significance of Paul's early letter.

Schreiner first considers the occasion for Paul's writing. He reconstructs the characteristics of those seeking to undercut Paul's ministry and message before progressing to the major Pauline theological claims within the letter. His use of mirror reading does not overreach in his sketch of the opponents, as he connects Paul's refutations and teachings to the apparent situation within the Galatian churches. The opponents sought to undercut the validity of Paul's gospel message, claiming it was not an accurate representation of the Jerusalem apostles from whom Paul must have received it. Paul, therefore, devoted the first large portion of the letter to a defense of the independence and legitimacy of his message, which was verified by—not received from—the other apostles.

Part 2 is the core of Schreiner's monograph, focusing upon the components and contents of Paul's gospel proclaimed to the Galatians. The author presents his most worthwhile insights here. He delivers thorough

comprehension of Scripture and ongoing academic conversations with fluidity, in-depth textual evidence, and compelling reason. Although disagreements within academia permeate his discourse, they never become the focal point of his elucidation of Galatians. He concisely yet sufficiently addresses Pauline assertions on circumcision, the Law, salvation history, covenants, and consistent moral living, demonstrating how these teachings radiate from the hub of the sacrifice of Christ. He persuasively argues that Paul viewed the death of Christ as the determining crux of history, theology, and practice for God's people.

In the concluding chapters, Schreiner shows how Paul's treatise on Abraham reveals the church's essential nature as the people of God, establishing boundaries and expectations for everyday life, including how the church eats from the same table, regardless of whether one is circumcised or not. He determines that Paul uses the latter chapters of Galatians to characterize key outcomes of being Christian, giving examples of what it looks like to walk by the Spirit and not by the flesh (which he identifies as the natural state of unregenerate people). The new way of living for God's people is by the Spirit's leading, who empowers righteousness in desire and action, with effects for the individual, the community, and structures within the church.

Schreiner includes his own review of another book as an appendix. He apparently shares his notes on John Barclay's 2015 monograph *Paul and the Gift* because he believes it will advance academic debates and discussions on Galatians beyond the new perspective introduced by E. P. Sanders in 1977 (cf. p. 76). Here he shares both his appreciation and critique of Barclay's contribution.

Schreiner's monograph functions as an insightful and articulate theological foray into the participants, themes, and arguments of Galatians, including academic debates surrounding these matters. He fairly critiques the various views and offers his stances according to the biblical evidence. His Galatians installment in the New Testament Theology series is accessibly written for pastors, seminarians, and lay people interested in biblical theology. It is easily digested with excellent summaries provided after each chapter. These do not give away all the treasures of the chapters but sufficiently provide the author's main points and outline. I would argue that this contribution to the New Testament Theology series is a sound required reading option for a class on Galatians. It should also be strongly considered as supplemental reading for an introductory course on biblical theology.

Christopher J. Jones
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Matthew V. Novenson. *Paul and Judaism at the End of History*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024. xiv + 306 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1009019354. \$39.99.

Matthew Novenson, adopting a perspective akin to the Paul-within-Judaism hermeneutic, seeks to illumine the age-old interpretive deadlock of Paul's relationship to Judaism. He argues that the premier way of understanding this relationship is through the apostle's distinctly Jewish understanding of ethnicity and eschatology. Paul is a Jew who does not understand "Judaism" as we moderns do, and he never forsakes his ethnic identity: "Judaism is the air Paul breathes, so to speak, the water he swims in" (p. 4). In fact, Paul's Jewishness constitutes the precise difficulty of interpreting him, because it provides the foundation for his understanding of time. Because of the coming, death, and resurrection of the Messiah Jesus, Paul sees the re-creation of the cosmos as a present eschatological fact—that is, Paul sees the new creation as a present reality.

The author outlines his reading in Chapter 1, where he briefly discusses the two terms driving his study, ethnicity and eschatology. He makes it clear that his endeavor in *Paul and Judaism* is a historical one, concerned with Paul's thought in his first century situation. He focuses his study on the seven "undisputed letters," certain not to sit well with some readers, but offers a nuanced discussion of the Pauline authorship dispute and the thorny historical issues behind it. In Chapter 2, Novenson discusses the term Ἰουδαϊσμός and the significance of its scarcity in Paul's corpus. This previously published chapter (Mark W. Elliott et al., eds., *Galatians and Christian Theology*, 2015) presents a riveting discussion of Paul's brief but famous autobiographical statement in Gal 1:13–14. In Chapter 3 the author addresses an important question, virtually taken for granted: "Who actually says justification from works of the law?" (p. 50). He sorts through various data points to demonstrate that no extant author held the view of justification from works of the law. Rather, this construction is "Paul's own polemical invention" (p. 76), used to argue against gentiles-in-Christ taking on the law, who thereby reject the Messiah and eliminate redemptive progress.

Chapter 4, "Paul versus the Gentiles," is perhaps the most important in the book. Novenson argues that gentiles-in-Christ are the primary audience of Paul's dispute over gentile circumcision, in contrast to the oft-held assumption that Jewish "judaizers" were compelling the gentiles to take on the law. He makes a persuasive case that gentiles are at the heart of the gentile circumcision controversy, not "judaizing" Jews. Any reader interested in Paul's audience must interact with Novenson's contribution here. Chapter 5, in a similar tone, is sure to ruffle the feathers of many a

reformed Christian though (a group to which the current reviewer belongs). Entitled "The Legalism of Paul," it features the author's in-depth study of the thorny and slippery concept of "legalism." He concludes that "measured by the rule people otherwise use when they speak of 'legalism,' Paul was a legalist" (p. 134).

In Chapter 6 Novenson examines Paul's ethnic chauvinism: From beginning to end, Paul understood Jews to be constitutionally virtuous and gentiles constitutionally wicked. Only after the indwelling of God's pneuma do gentiles begin to do good. He then moves in Chapter 7 to the issue of "true Israel" or "spiritual Israel," and through careful textual analysis argues that Paul does not apply either term to those gentiles who are in Christ, despite modern English translations. In Chapter 8 the author argues that Paul understood the resurrection of the righteous to be a present reality, which was always promised to the Jews but has now, by God's mercy, been offered to the gentiles. Chapter 9 concludes with his discussion of the law and its place in Paul's eschatology. When humans become God's pneumatic creatures, the law adapts to their new state of being—a new "righteousness that agrees with but also transcends the righteousness prescribed by Moses" (p. 241).

Novenson's reading of the difficult problem of Paul and his relationship to "Judaism" is fresh and meticulously researched. There are certainly idiosyncrasies in his treatment of Paul, but any Pauline interpreter must reckon with his careful scholarship. His book is intended for an academic audience and would be a definite challenge for someone unfamiliar with the scholarly conversation. Nevertheless, his writing style is accessible and precise, rendering the book an enjoyable read. Overall, *Paul and Judaism at the End of History* is a first-rate historical study in Paul's letters, certain to provoke serious thought on Paul's thoroughgoing messianism, understanding of ethnicity, and eschatological viewpoint.

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Patrick Gray, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. xx + 430 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-0190904333. \$178.00.

Although the Catholic Epistles (CE) have traditionally received considerably less attention than other portions of the NT canon, scholarship relating to these writings has steadily increased in recent decades. In addition to a growing body of publications treating major themes and hermeneutical issues related to the CE, recent studies have sought to provide a fuller picture of the historical background and reception of each work.

Designed to address the recent developments in the evaluation of the CE and Hebrews—a writing often studied alongside the CE despite its historical connection to the Pauline corpus—is this recent addition to the Oxford Handbook series. As explained by the editor, Patrick Gray, the volume “seeks to assess the relevance of these works to various questions that are often posed to other parts of the NT canon, to report on the current state of scholarship devoted to the interpretive issues they raised, and to survey their rich and often overlooked afterlives” (p. x).

Arranged in four major units, the handbook contains twenty-four essays produced by a diverse body of scholars from around the world. Some contributors hold more traditional perspectives on foundational subjects, such as the authorship and dating of the CE, while others view some or all the writings as later products of church history with no direct link to the apostolic community. Each essay is written in a concise and accessible manner with notes kept to a minimum. Included at the end of each essay is a helpful “References” section that includes an up-to-date bibliography of useful sources.

Part 1, “General Issues,” address a wide range of subjects relating to Hebrews or the CE. Most of the essays in this section address foundational historical matters. These include treatments on major textual issues (Thomas Kraus), the canonical reception of the writings (Darian Lockett and Clare Rothschild), the subject of authorship (Armin Baum), the relationship between Hebrews and the CE to Pauline Christianity (Bryan Dyer), what the writings reveal about the early relationship between Christianity and Judaism (Matt Jackson-McCabe), and the eschatological hopes of early Christians (Simon Gathercole).

Part 2 addresses specific issues relating to the study of Hebrews. The first essay in the unit (Kenneth Schenck) provides a helpful survey of a wide range of contested issues related to the writing’s background such as its literary features, authorship, dating, the intended readers, and offers a brief treatment of recent scholarship on the theology of Hebrews. Also included in the unit are essays on the controversial subject of supersessionism (Philip Church), the use of Scripture by the author of Hebrews (Susan Docherty), and the way the author of Hebrews portrays the atonement of Christ (David Moffitt).

The essays contained in Part 3 address issues frequently discussed in secondary literature on the CE. The first four essays explore contested issues related to the background and theology of one or more of the CE (Alicia Batten on James; Duane Watson on 1 Peter; Travis Williams on 2 Peter and Jude; William Wright on the Johannine Epistles). The unit also contains an essay on the relationship between James and the historical Jesus (Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr), as well as essays on the ecclesiology (David

Downs) and eschatology (Katie Marcar) of the CE.

The fourth and final unit addresses the reception of Hebrews and the CE. The essays provide an intriguing discussion of how various theological subjects were understood during various periods of church history and how the writings have shaped Christian thought and practice. The first four essays provide a historical survey of the reception of one or more writings (Jason Whitlark on Hebrews; David Gowler on James; Patrick Gray and Adam Booth on the Petrine Epistles and Jude; Alicia Myers on the Johannine Epistles). Also included are essays on the treatment of Hebrews at the Council of Trent (Alan Mitchell) and how the CE and Hebrews have influenced creeds, confessional statements, and worship in the Protestant tradition (Lance Peeler).

As is the case with any project of this scope, readers will naturally find some essays of greater interest or value than others and resonate to various degrees with the conclusions drawn by each scholar. Considered as a whole, however, the volume makes a significant contribution to the study of Hebrews and the CE. Those wishing to explore specific issues related to the background and message of these writings or become more informed on recent developments in biblical scholarship will find the volume a valuable resource. Unfortunately, the hefty retail price of the hardback edition will naturally limit the work’s readership. We can hope that Oxford University Press will release a more economically priced paperback edition soon.

Benjamin P. Laird
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C. Kavin Rowe. *Method, Context, and Meaning in New Testament Studies*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024. 332 pp. Hardback. 978-0802877598. \$69.99.

_____. *Studies in Luke, Acts, and Paul*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024. 384 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-0802882745. \$75.99.

In these volumes, Kavin Rowe brings together thirty-one essays from across his career that highlight his substantive contribution to the fields of hermeneutics, NT studies, and the history of early Christianity. Rowe has a direct writing style that matches his methodological clarity and his penchant for precision. These features serve his analysis of the often complex and technical issues of history and exegesis.

One way to characterize these essays is with the terms *conversation* and *comparison*. A dialogic quality enlivens the methodological discussion in these studies from several distinct angles. There is serious engagement

with various biblical texts and interaction with a wide range of dialogue partners. His series of essays on Luke and Acts, for instance, usually includes the close reading of a particular biblical passage that serves as an anchoring focal point through which he engages broader biblical-theological themes (see *Studies*, 3–72, 110–214).

A good example of this is his treatment of Acts 2:36, a text that speaks of God *making* Jesus “both Lord and Christ” (*Studies*, 179–200). In his analysis, Rowe situates this text within the narrative framework of Luke-Acts and notes the tension generated by the fact that Luke has already identified Jesus as Lord in strategic ways in the preceding narrative. He then surveys the history of interpretation from Arian interpreters to historical-critical commentators and then articulates the “Christological coherence” of this passage (*Studies*, 179). His argument for a confessional approach to the discipline of NT studies is likewise rooted in the exegesis of strategic passages about the nature of truth alongside interaction with contemporary scholarship and the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard (*Method*, 3–19).

Rowe also includes several essays that state the big idea or the specific thesis of one of his larger works and then proceed to interact with critical responses to that larger work. These include his study of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world, especially in relation to Empire studies (*Studies*, 3–23), the theological truth claims of the book of Acts (*Studies*, 95–109), his narrative analysis of Jesus as Lord in Luke’s Gospel (*Studies*, 73–94), and his examination of the Stoic tradition (*Method*, 155–78). These entries provide helpful précis of his primary arguments in the larger works. For readers already familiar with those volumes, these interactions provide clarification and depth of understanding. For Rowe, this further engagement with critics is an “attempt to reason together in search of common wisdom” (*Studies*, 95).

Alongside conversation, he also endeavors to complexify and clarify the art and science of comparative analysis. In particular, he develops his proposal that certain traditions constitute “grammars of life” that integrate an array of historical, theological, textual, and social dimensions (*Method*, 155). To compare traditions such as these (Christianity, Judaism, or Stoicism), this comprehensive element must be considered. Rowe observes in this vein that “comparison between strong traditions of life asks us what we make of the truth claims of others” and therefore requires us “to specify what posture of reasoning *we* take toward *them* and what the consequences are of our rejection/acceptance” (*Method*, 156). For him, “comparison is finally a question of truth, of relationships, of politics, and thus of practical reason.” Accordingly, the act of comparing comprehensive traditions “questions the shape of our existence, both what we’ve

been and what we will become” (*Method*, 156).

In other words, more is at stake in this kind of historical comparative analysis than simply descriptive data-gathering and conceptual synthesis. For Rowe, comparative inquiry is “less a question about a specific method than it is about being human in a world with competing accounts of what that is” (*Method*, 200). When examining mutually exclusive traditions that are integrated into an entire way of viewing the world, the interpreter or historian requires extensive time and a vantage point of considerable range. Practically, then, “to study alternative traditions as an academic is to learn patience” (*Method*, 178). His central claim about comparative inquiry in the ancient world is provocative and has prompted rejoinder and criticism from a variety of methodological angles. However, he summarizes many of these criticisms and responds in several essays that were originally portions of published forums on his work (see especially *Method*, 179–215).

A final feature worth noting is the way these essays evidence Rowe’s composite skill as an exegete, a historian, and a theologian. He writes within an interdisciplinary atmosphere where exegesis is organically informed by a set of historical and theological instincts. There are obviously specific areas or interpretive positions among these essays that will evoke disagreement (something surfaced by his own replies to various criticisms). Nevertheless, as a collection of substantive ideas and conclusions presented for students and other scholars to consider, these volumes admirably succeed.

Ched Spellman
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Kevin J. Vanhoozer. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024. xxiv + 424 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-0310234388. \$39.99.

In *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer applies the guiding principle of C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* to hermeneutics by providing the “mere essentials” to read “the Bible *theologically*” (p. xiii). He believes “that we need all the theological disciplines, and several kinds of biblical criticism, to read the Bible rightly, in ways that do justice to both its human and divine authorship” (p. xxii). For this to happen, he argues that a transformational and trans-figural interpretation is necessary “to attend both to the Bible’s literal sense and to the light in the letter” (p. xxii).

The purpose of Vanhoozer’s work is “a call for a return to biblical Christianity, for a theological approach to reading Scripture with and for

the people of God, past and present, from east, west, north, and south” (p. xvii). He argues that a mere Christian hermeneutic is a principled approach to biblical interpretation that (1) asks what we are doing in reading the Bible, particularly for its literal sense, and (2) emerges from both the historic consensus on the essentials of the faith and a church-based understanding of what the Bible is primarily for (pp. xvii–xviii).

His goal of the “book is to think about biblical interpretation in the Bible’s own theological terms” (p. xx). In doing so, he attempts to solve the hermeneutical divide to “recover Christian practices of reading the Bible theologically, for the sake of the well-being of the church, academy, and world” (p. xvii).

Vanhoozer accomplishes his goal over the course of three parts by casting a vision for transformational reading that is applicable to all who claim Christ as King. In Part 1, he begins by assessing the divide of “reading cultures” in the church from the medieval period (e.g., scholastic versus monastic) to modernity (e.g., exegesis versus theology). He highlights how the church and academy have wrestled with understanding the letter of the text, and the spirit of the letter, arguing that a balance is needed. In Part 2, he continues his discussion on *sensus literalis*, emphasizing a trans-figural interpretation that is Christoscopic in nature and grammatical-eschatological in methodology. He argues both are necessary for the church and the academy. Finally, Part 3 develops the principle and motif for a mere Christian hermeneutic *light*—the knowledge that comes from the light of Christ’s face. Vanhoozer describes this approach as trans-figural reading that leads to understanding Scripture through the transfiguration of Christ. Through this trans-figural interpretation, the reader encounters the light of Christ and is transformed in both mind (understanding the text) and heart (being conformed to the image of the Son).

The author presents a comprehensive assessment of the history of hermeneutics and biblical interpretation in his pursuit to develop a mere Christian hermeneutic. He explores various elements of hermeneutics, ranging from a survey of the history of interpretation to understanding *sensus literalis* and *sensus plenior*, comparing reading literality with reading literally, and proposes a trans-figural literal interpretation. Readers not familiar with the divide over biblical interpretation will find a treasure trove of valuable research here.

What Vanhoozer accomplishes is not only helpful, but also thought-provoking. The mental rigor he encourages through his work benefits the reader greatly in understanding the “why” of interpreting Scripture. While the first two parts of the book can be challenging to grasp for those not familiar with the subject, the final part brings everything together and presents practical pathways for applying a mere Christian hermeneutic to

Scripture. In the end, these minor difficulties pay off as he provides a rich study on the “why” of hermeneutics.

In sum, Vanhoozer emphasizes that it is not “how” one approaches Scripture, but “why” one reads Scripture. He asserts that the “chief purpose of reading the Bible theologically is to learn Christ—which involves much more than learning *about* Christ” (p. 360). It is to be conformed to the image of the Son. “Mere Christian hermeneutics is ultimately a vision for forming reading cultures that, in turn, form readers who can bear witness to the light by proclaiming the excellencies of him who called us into his marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9)” (p. 372). Vanhoozer not only provides a compelling solution to what it means to read the Bible theologically; he also emphasizes the importance of doing so. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* guides the reader in understanding the “why” and the “how” of reading Scripture well, enabling one to encounter the face of God through Christ and be transformed into the likeness of the Son.

Nicholas Dawson
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Eric Yang, ed. *Exemplars, Imitation, and Character Formation: A Philosophical, Psychological, and Christian Inquiry*. New York: Routledge, 2025. 264 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1032639352. \$136.00.

In 1 Cor 11:1, Paul urges his readers to “be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (NET). Similar NT exhortations include Matt 11:28–30; John 13:15; 1 Cor 4:14–17; Eph 5:1; Phil 3:12–17; 2 Thess 3:7–9; and 1 Pet 2:21. Imitation of exemplary persons also has an extensive history, both within the Christian tradition (e.g., *The Rule of St. Benedict* or *The Imitation of Christ*) and beyond (e.g., *The Analects of Confucius*). However, as Eric Yang points out in his *Exemplars, Imitation, and Character Formation*, this substantial history has received relatively little systematic analysis in today’s philosophical and theological discussions.

Many will agree that imitating Christ is important, but what does it mean that Christ is an exemplar? What does it mean to “imitate” him? What does the process look like? What goals of imitation are realistic and what are not? Yang’s book brings together a host of authors to begin answering these questions. They do so in conversation with the foremost ethical theory of exemplarism today, set forth in Linda Zagzebski’s *Divine Motivation Theory* and *Exemplarist Moral Theory*.

Yang’s work is split into three sections, covering philosophical, psychological, and theological perspectives. The first section, focused on philosophical problems, deals with questions on the force of moral charisma (pp. 9–26), whether a community can serve as a moral exemplar

(pp. 27–40), the difference between imitating and emulating (pp. 41–56), the role of modeling in exemplar ethics (pp. 57–66), and the importance of admiration and emulation of human exemplars (pp. 67–80). The second section, dealing with psychological questions, provides a set of interesting studies on the role of empathy in appraisal (pp. 83–101), families as exemplar communities (pp. 102–15), the role of tradition in Roman Catholic spiritual formation (pp. 116–35), and exemplarism in the development of practical wisdom (pp. 136–56). The third and final section, focused on theological topics, examines Martin Luther (pp. 159–86) and Antony of Egypt (pp. 215–30) as models of the imitation of Christ, the possibility of imitating divine love (pp. 187–99), Christ as an exemplar accessible to anyone (pp. 200–14), and the possibility of indirect imitation of saints through a divine medium (pp. 231–41).

I have a minor criticism of the book's model, popular though it is. Although there is value in providing articles from different disciplinary perspectives on the same topic, this easily leads to reading a book piecemeal. Philosophers read the sections on philosophy, psychologists the sections on psychology, etc. This model offers little in the way of actual interaction between the disciplines. As a correction to this trend, it would be helpful to introduce joint projects in which individuals from different disciplines unify their methodologies, study together, and provide combined results. This is certainly not unheard of and could provide greater interdisciplinary value for the readers. That said, I do not want to argue that this work should be different to what it is.

Positively, each chapter raises interesting and important problems, and several engage the same fundamental ideas from different perspectives. This is especially true of chapters 2 and 7 which both address the idea of an exemplar community, and chapters 4 and 14 which examine the fundamental issue of suitable imitation. In many cases, direct imitation of the actions of an exemplar is either impossible or inappropriate for those seeking to emulate that exemplar. In some cases, directly imitating an exemplar would be morally deforming rather than morally forming. These chapters offer significant, working answers to this problem from the context of exemplar ethics. Further, both themes are significant in the development of exemplar ethics and virtue ethics overall (p. 243).

Linda Zagzebski also raises an important question in her afterward to the book: What leads so many modern people to resist admiring exemplary people? Why do we love to see heroes fall rather than strive to be more like them? She does not provide an answer, nor do any of the chapters. However, the question itself is thought-provoking and, within this context, opens important avenues for new empirical and theoretical research.

In sum, while one can hope to see more examples of deeply interdisciplinary work in the future, Yang's collection is a helpful addition to the literature on exemplar ethics. It highlights important problems, proposes interesting new solutions, and overall, extends the discussion a few more steps in the right direction.

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A. Andrew Das. *Remarriage in Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024. 384 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-0802883742. \$45.00.

A common assumption within the Protestant tradition is that individuals with biblical grounds for divorce are free to remarry. In his comprehensive treatment of the subject of remarriage in early Christianity, Andrew Das challenges this viewpoint, arguing that Jesus, the biblical authors, and early Christian interpreters all shared the perspective that remarriage is permissible only after the death of one's spouse.

In the first chapter, Das examines the practices of divorce and remarriage in various first-century contexts. Aside from some unique exceptions, he observes, the remarriage of divorced individuals was commonly permitted. During the Second Temple period, divorce for any reason was widely recognized in Jewish culture and the right to remarry widely assumed. The situation was not very different in the Greco-Roman world. In fact, during the reign of Augustus, divorced women and widows under fifty were legally required to remarry (p. 52). "By the time of Jesus," Das explains, "most of his fellow Jews would take divorce and remarriage for granted. Greeks and Romans likewise permitted divorce and remarriage" (p. 15).

The heart of the book, chapters 2 through 5, examines the primary biblical texts that address divorce and/or remarriage (Matt 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11–12; Luke 16:18; 1 Cor 7). Those who hold that remarriage is sanctioned when there is a biblical ground for divorce will naturally disagree with Das's treatment of various aspects of these texts. In short, he finds no evidence in the NT that remarriage is permissible in any case except for the death of a spouse. As he contends, Jesus's teaching explicitly prohibits divorce except in cases of infidelity and prohibits individuals from marrying a divorced person. Regarding the much-disputed passages in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 5:32 and 19:9), he explains that the exception clauses "are understandable in view of the requirement for divorce in situations of spousal infidelity among many first-century Jews" (p. 143). While Jesus permitted divorce in cases of *πορνεία*, it would be misguided, he argues, to assume that the permission to divorce entails the right to

remarry. This is not stated anywhere, he observes. In fact, Matt 5:32, along with Luke 16:18, explicitly describe marriage to a divorced woman as adultery.

In the case of Matt 19:9, Das argues that the exception relates only to the verb ἀπολύω and does not include γαμέω. He also favors the longer reading found in Codex Vaticanus that contains the additional words “and he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery,” a clause like that found in Matt 5:32 and Luke 16:18. He notes how Jesus’s pronouncement naturally transitions into his reference in 19:12 to eunuchs. Those who choose to follow Jesus’s instructions and not remarry, he reasons, are like those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In his treatment of Paul’s teaching on marriage in 1 Cor 7, Das observes that the basic instruction throughout the chapter is “stay as you are unless Paul provides an alternative” (p. 197). Notably, “Paul does not include any language to allow for an exception to marry another in cases of legitimately grounded divorces, and one should not assume so in view of the emphatic instructions” (p. 196). He examines five details in Paul’s instruction which many interpreters regard as evidence that he assumed or recognized remarriage in cases other than the death of a spouse. In contrast to this perspective, he concludes, “The matter of remarriage is only explicitly mentioned in vv. 11 and 39 when Paul denies it as an option apart from the death of a spouse. The rest of the chapter, even 7:15, simply does not mention it” (p. 230).

In the final chapter (chapter 6), Das seeks to demonstrate that Christian writers up to the Council of Nicaea universally accepted the position that remarriage is permissible only after the death of a spouse. After examining the writings of several early interpreters, he asserts, “One searches in vain for an ante-Nicene source that cites the Matthean exception clauses as justifying remarriage after divorce for *anyone* The ante-Nicene authors never even raised the possibility that the innocent parties in a legitimate divorce are allowed to remarry” (pp. 279–80).

Regardless of what one may think about his conclusions, Das’s study serves in many ways as an exemplary model of biblical scholarship. He addresses a difficult and sensitive subject and follows the evidence where he believes it leads. Throughout the volume, he carefully explores a wide range of evidence, interacts with a variety of scholarly approaches and theological positions, offers keen exegetical observations, and demonstrates sensitivity to those who share alternative opinions. Even those who find his thesis unconvincing must applaud his effort to defend a position that clearly runs counter to modern perceptions and sensibilities.

At the very least, his substantial work on the subject deserves a fair hearing and careful consideration.

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Thomas S. Kidd. *Christian History Volume 2: From the Reformation to the Present*. Brentwood: B&H Academic, 2024. 446 pp. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1087737010. \$54.99.

Teachers are acquainted with painful decisions surrounding textbooks. When it comes to Church History, replacing a trusted source can be a difficult choice. While many factors are included in the adoption process, Thomas Kidd’s newest textbook deserves serious consideration. He was a long-time professor of American History at Baylor University. He now teaches Christian History at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is able to capably communicate historically accurate information in a readable, succinct, but not overly simplified manner. Each chapter of his work is divided into short sections. They range from a half page to three pages and are engaging to the non-expert. These sections allow the reader to digest the complex themes of a particular topic of Church History in one brief sitting.

However, do we need a new Church History text? This book offers a few unique features to justify the existence of another survey. Kidd is an expert on Evangelical and Baptist history, especially in America. He approaches Evangelical history with deep sympathy but also historical fairness. His text speaks to the complex legacy of the First and Second Great Awakenings and their impact on global Christianity. He is aware of the excesses of early nineteenth-century revivalism, while still recognizing its considerable impact on American culture and what his Baylor colleague, Rodney Stark, called the “churching of America.” In fact, his treatment of the Second Great Awakening may be the book’s greatest strength. Significantly, he highlights the impact of African Americans during that Awakening, to raise Richard Allen and George Liele from obscurity to the ranks of key leaders in Christian History. This book may provide students in Baptist or Evangelical seminaries a much-needed foundation for understanding their own faith background.

Second, Kidd provides an updated text that recognizes the prominence of the experience of Majority World Christians. He begins this narrative by highlighting the efforts of Protestant and Catholic missionaries in the early modern area. He gives the missionary zeal of eighteenth and nineteenth-century pietism and Evangelicalism considerable attention. As his story proceeds into the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these

American and European movements are consistently connected to global Christianity. He demonstrates a thorough understanding of the complexities of Latin American Christianity, for instance. Many texts offer a cursory glance at Latin American Christianity and the impact of Liberation theology. However, Kidd recognizes the importance of the theme of liberation and offers a more complete picture by describing the shift of Latin Christians from Catholicism to Pentecostalism. The last forty years in Latin America have witnessed far more Evangelical conversions than social revolutions.

Despite the needed attention given to Christianity in the Global South, Kidd's point of reference remains Western Christianity, particularly in its Protestant, Evangelical, and Baptist expressions. His telling of the last five hundred years of Christianity centers in the West. That, however, may not be a weakness. Starting points are inevitable. Many professors will find this approach fits their own course objectives.

With such a well-crafted textbook, it is difficult to voice critiques. Nevertheless, Kidd's selected bibliographies at the end of each chapter unnecessarily preference recent scholarship while neglecting classic works of Church History. I understand the scholarly desire to rely on the most up-to-date material, but it is futile to introduce readers to secondary literature on the English Reformation without reference to Eamon Duffy or to Evangelicalism without David Bebbington. Students of Church History would benefit greatly from knowing what major voices have spoken about the subject.

Additionally, this book is an example of a tendency in recent Protestant scholarship to downplay the impact of Renaissance humanism on the Reformation and to emphasize the continuities of the Reformation with previous eras. (See Matthew Barrett's *Reformation as Renewal*.) I presume this tendency follows Richard Muller's interpretation of Reformation history. Muller's emphasis on continuity is a needed corrective, but humanists like Erasmus are unfortunate victims of this trend. In my estimation, the influence of Erasmus, through his critique of late-medieval Catholicism, calls for lay piety, production of the *Textus Receptus*, and calls for vernacular translation, are the building blocks of Protestantism. These deserve a more prominent place than this book affords. Humanism is not a tangential piece of Reformation history, but a key influence on Zwingli, Melancthon, Bullinger, and Calvin.

Nevertheless, these weaknesses can mostly be explained by the limitations of such an extensive topic. Any survey text on Church history will neglect something important. Overall, Kidd's work is masterfully written. Readers will be captivated by the story of the Church. Theological ideas

are introduced, but history takes the driver's seat. Church History professors of Evangelical or Baptist institutions would do well to adopt this book.

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Jacob E. Hicks. *To Contest with All the Powers of Darkness: New England Baptists, Religious Liberty, and New Political Landscapes, 1740–1833*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2024. 218 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1621908289. \$55.00

While discussing religion and politics might be frowned upon at dinner parties, it is essential to the historian's task. In *To Contest With All the Powers of Darkness*, Jacob Hicks argues that New England Baptists and the United States developed together and shaped one another.

Chapter 1 could easily serve as a primer on Baptist distinctives, touching on themes of baptism by immersion, biblicism, church discipline, regenerate church membership, congregational authority, and associationism. Hicks tells the familiar story of the establishment of the Separate Baptists during the Great Awakening and details Rhode Island Baptists' hesitancy to establish the Warren Association in 1767. Two years later, the association formed its "Grievance Committee." By 1772, influential preacher Isaac Backus led the committee, which detailed state harassment suffered by Baptists and drafted legislation to eliminate religious persecution.

Hicks's narrative follows the transformation of New England Baptists from unorganized dissenters into a "sustained political movement" through printed media (p. 40). Early on, Backus and the Grievance Committee recognized the importance and effectiveness of print in unifying Baptists in their political endeavors. Consequently, printers and booksellers in the early republic made Backus famous, spreading the Baptist political message and uniting naturally sectarian churches around a common cause. In fact, Baptists did not win early battles for religious liberty through appeals to the court or the Crown but through mass appeal in the press. Indeed, a separate monograph could be written exploring the role of the press in the disestablishment of religion in the early republic. It is noteworthy that religious liberty, not confessionism or creedalism, was the foundation for unity and associationism among early American Baptists.

Hicks then details John Leland's efforts at unifying Baptists as a political movement. Leland had been a successful political organizer for the Baptist cause in Virginia, having helped James Madison win election to

the Virginia Ratifying Convention. He worked to assure Baptists they could trust politicians. He was a thoroughgoing Jeffersonian, which went together with baptistic individualism. His influence helped spread Democratic-Republican ideals among Baptists in Virginia and New England. Hicks also notes the unlikely political alliance of Congregationalist church members and dissenting religious groups in the 1820s. This came about as Congregationalist churches struggled with Unitarianism in the early 19th century, forcing Trinitarian Congregationalists to become dissenters. Simultaneously, Massachusetts Baptists were becoming part of the mainstream. Indeed, this was a peculiar political union, yet they created a strong Democratic-Republican coalition.

Dying in 1841, Leland lived long enough to see Baptists evolve from disorganized, dissenting churches into a “mainstream, ‘evangelical’ united front” moving toward political hegemony (p. 113). Thus, by the 1830s, Massachusetts Baptists were no longer dissenters or Democratic-Republicans. They were New Englanders. They now identified themselves by their regional distinctives rather than denominational distinctives. They traded their doctrines of separation and dissent for political power, seeking to legislate their interpretation of religious morality. Perhaps modern Baptists, especially those who eschew traditional Baptist identity in exchange for political hegemony and “Christian nationalism,” would do well to consider Leland and John Taylor’s lament as summarized by Hicks: “Baptists were losing their identity, and most were glad to do it” (p. 137).

In sum, Hicks demonstrates the relevance of studying history—specifically Baptist history—as its themes resonate with contemporary challenges regarding the establishment of religion and religious liberty. The only complaint one might bring to the text is its price compared to its brevity. Although well-written, it consists of only 146 pages, excluding end notes and bibliography. Nevertheless, Baptist historians and historians of the early republic will benefit significantly from *To Contest with All the Powers of Darkness*. It would also make a welcome addition to the bibliography for Baptist studies or early American history courses.

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