

CORPORATE WORSHIP



HOW
THE CHURCH
GATHERS
AS GOD'S
PEOPLE

MATT MERKER

Foreword by Ligon Duncan

"We first met Matt Merker after hearing his incredible hymn, 'He Will Hold Me Fast.' Since then, he has become a friend, cowriter, and eventually, fellow leader in our team. His vision and voice on the subject of the gathered worship of God's people has enriched so much of our thinking personally and in our organization. Matt shows pastors, music leaders, and all of us how to keep our focus on the Bible's priorities for corporate worship: God's glory, the church's growth, and proclaiming the gospel to the world. As Matt himself says, you do not need to agree with every specific application for this volume to be a major help in planning and preparing for the Sunday service. Rather, this book reminds us all to rediscover the wonderful reality that God gathers us together as a united body to hear his word and sing his praise. We have long been praying for a deepening of congregational worship around the globe in the twenty-first century, and we warmly commend this book as one resource that we trust will be used by God toward that end."

Keith and Kristyn Getty, hymn writers; recording artists; authors, *Sing! How Worship Transforms Your Life, Family, and Church*

"The worship of God demands our full attention. It is not a subject to be taken lightly, but thoughtfully and biblically. This contribution by Matt Merker points us in that direction, and anyone charged with leading corporate worship would do well to listen."

Matt Boswell, Pastor, The Trails Church, Celina, Texas; hymn writer

"A number of books in recent decades have addressed the vital topic of what God wants churches to do when they gather on the Lord's day. Some are richly theological. Others are thoughtfully practical. Matt Merker's new book, *Corporate Worship*, is both and more. Drawing from a diverse church background and a deep commitment to studying and applying God's word, Matt stands firm on nonnegotiable issues and winsomely approaches negotiable ones. Above all, he keeps us focused on Jesus Christ, the one in whose name we gather, and whose substitutionary death and victorious resurrection are the reason we worship. Wherever you find yourself on the liturgical spectrum, *Corporate Worship* will encourage you toward more theologically driven, emotionally engaging, and Christ-exalting gatherings."

Bob Kauflin, Director, Sovereign Grace Music; author, *Worship Matters and True Worshipers*

“Not too many people have stopped to think about what it means to worship, let alone what it means to worship together as the body of Christ. This brief but significant book will help you understand the nature of corporate worship in a biblical sense. Matt Merker reminds us that we gather together at God’s invitation to glorify his name and to celebrate as a community what he has done in and through the work of Christ. The church gathering is only a foretaste of what will take place in heaven, as we can glimpse from Revelation 5. What we do in personal worship should have a corporate expression to reflect the unity of the Spirit and as a testimony to the unbelieving world. Merker is trying to help the worship experience of the church of our days as we understand its nature and the purpose for which we gather.”

Miguel Núñez, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

“In this book, Matt Merker brings to us in a refreshing way a truth about the church that we often take for granted: namely, that the church is a gathered community for the purpose of worshiping God. Even under intense, life-threatening persecution, God’s people gather together and worship their Creator, Sustainer, Savior, and soon-coming King. This book is about why this must be the case and what ought to happen when the church gathers. Read it to underpin the vital place of corporate worship in your life as a believer and, indeed, in the life of your church!”

Conrad Mbewe, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia

“When correctly understood, corporate worship is more than just the highlight of the life of the church—it is the very center of the life of the church. When we gather, not only is the health and vitality of the church body put on display, but corporate worship also shapes and strengthens the life of the church. There is simply no way for a church to bypass anemic corporate gatherings to health in the life of the church. This little book is packed with both doctrine and counsel that will help the reader press toward a more Scripture-shaped vision for corporate worship. There is a treasure trove of grace to be found by the saints who will give themselves to approaching God in worship on his terms. In this book you will not only find helpful counsel on ways you can improve your corporate gatherings, but you will also be resourced with the biblical thinking that lies behind the biblical practice we all desire to grow in.”

Kenneth Mbugua, Senior Pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church, Nairobi, Kenya

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BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

CORPORATE WORSHIP

HOW
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AS GOD'S
PEOPLE

MATT MERKER

Foreword by Ligon Duncan

 **CROSSWAY®**

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For Erica, Lena, and Isaiah

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FOREWORD

This is a book about worship, specifically “corporate worship,” that is, believers gathering for the express purpose of giving praise to God. That is a very important subject and activity. People were created, and Christians were redeemed, in order to worship. Paul makes that clear in Ephesians 1, where he says that everything in God’s plan of salvation, from before the beginning of time, is meant to lead up to our being “to the praise of his glory.” And in case we miss this, he says it three times (Eph. 1:6, 12, and 14). Hughes Oliphant Old (who probably knew more about the history of Christian worship than any other Protestant writer in recent times) points us to the Psalms and then back to this passage in Paul to explain:

We worship God because God created us to worship him. Worship is at the center of our existence, at the heart of our reason for being. God created us to be his image—an image that would reflect his glory. In fact, the whole creation was brought into existence to reflect the divine glory. The psalmist tells us that “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). The apostle Paul in the prayer with which he begins the epistle to the Ephesians makes it clear that God created us to praise him:

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Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace . . . (Eph. 1:3–6)

This prayer says much about the worship of the earliest Christians. It shows the consciousness that the first Christians had of the ultimate significance of their worship. They understood themselves to have been destined and appointed to live to the praise of God's glory (Eph. 1:12).¹

What is worship? Well, the psalmist tells us succinctly. It is giving unto the Lord the glory due his name (Ps. 29:1–2). What, then, should we aim to do in corporate worship? Our aim, as the congregation gathers to meet with God in public worship on the Lord's Day, is to glorify and enjoy God, in accordance with his written Word. That is, the very purpose of assembling together as the people of God in congregational worship is to give to the Lord the glory due his name and to enjoy the blessing of his promised special presence with his own people, in obedience to his instructions set forth in the Scriptures.

Corporate worship (so-called because the body or *corpus* of Christ, that is, the people of God, the church, is collectively involved in this encounter with God) is sometimes referred to as “gathered,” “assembled,” “public,” or “congregational”

¹ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed according to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), 1.

worship. All of these names are helpful, and bring out different dimensions of this important aspect of biblical worship. Though the Bible indicates that there are, in addition to public worship, other distinct and significant facets of Christian worship (like family worship, private worship, and worship in all of life), the importance of public or corporate worship is featured in both the Old and New Testaments. When Psalm 100:2 and Hebrews 10:25 speak of “coming before the Lord” and “assembling together” they are both addressing public or gathered worship.

As Christians, we believe it is important that we worship corporately, for God has made us his family, and corporate worship is a family meeting with God. It is the covenant community engaging with God, gathering with his people to seek his face, to glorify and enjoy him, to hear his Word, to revel in the glory of union and communion with him, to respond to his Word, to render praise back to him, to give unto him the glory due his name.

The New Testament makes clear that the congregation of Christians, this family, this body, this community, is the place where God is especially present in this world. In the days of the old covenant, the place where God manifested his special presence was “the tabernacle” or “the temple” or “Jerusalem.” In the new covenant, that special “place” is now wherever the Lord’s house, that is, his people, is gathered. Jesus stresses this to the Samaritan woman (John 4:21) and to his disciples in addressing congregational discipline (Matt. 18:20, surely a solemn component of the life of the gathered church). The place of new covenant worship is no longer inextricably tied to

a geographical location and a physical structure but to a gathered people. This is why, in the old Scottish tradition, as the people gathered to enter a church building, it would be said that “the Kirk² goes in” rather than, as we often say, “we are going to church.” The new covenant *locus* or place of the special presence of God with the church militant is in this gathered body, wherever it might be—whether in catacombs, or a storefront, or a beautiful colonial church building. This makes corporate worship extremely important.

The great distinctive of the whole approach to public worship commended in this book is that we aim for the form and substance of our corporate worship to be biblical, to be suffused with and guided by Scripture and scriptural theology. An apt motto for this approach is, “Read the Bible, Preach the Bible, Pray the Bible, Sing the Bible, See the Bible (visibly depicted in the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper).”

As a pastor, I am always looking for sound Christian writers who can help me explain these kinds of true, good, and important things better—more simply, scripturally, clearly, and compellingly. Matt Merker helps me do precisely that in this book. I lost count of the times I thought to myself, “that is really well put. That helps my own soul, and I can use that biblical truth, articulated in that way, to better equip the saints in their public praise of God.” But he also helps me diagnose some unique current challenges to my people in their understanding and practice of congregational worship. Two (among others) stand out to me.

²The Scots word for “church.”

Matt mentions what has been called “liturgical pragmatism,” that is, a decision to do “whatever works” to reach out to and evangelize unbelievers. I think that approach has effectively de-churched many churches in my lifetime, and left generations of Christians with a lack of understanding of what is supposed to be entailed in Christian corporate worship. This challenge is not the fault of the people but of often-well-meaning pastors and leaders, who want to reach out with the gospel to unbelievers. They sincerely desire to “church the unchurched,” but they end up “unchurching the church.” Because of their evangelistic pragmatism, their services do not follow biblical patterns and principles and often are bereft of biblical content. Not surprisingly, discipleship and corporate worship suffer in such settings. I think Matt is right in putting his finger on that as a key problem in our time (and sadly, it does continue to be a problem). Over the course of my seventeen years at First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, I had droves of Christian young people join our congregation precisely because they were refugees from these kinds of settings. They were looking for both sound biblical exposition and solid biblical corporate worship.

Another significant problem Matt mentions is that of a consumer mindset. This is a problem of the people (exacerbated by pastors and leaders who play to it). If we come as religious consumers to public services of worship, we will have the attitude of a customer, and the customer, as they say, is always right. It’s all about what we want, what we think, about our opinion. So we ask, *Did I like the musicians and the music?* rather than, *did the congregational singing help me worship*

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God and was it filled with the truth of Scripture? We ask, *Did I like the preacher and his preaching?* rather than, was the preaching faithful to the Bible, and did it expound God, the gospel, and godliness from his Word, and did I respond to it in faith, wonder, love, and praise of God? C. S. Lewis has Screwtape advise his demon understudy Wormwood that if he can't cure a man of churchgoing he should aim to turn him into a taster or connoisseur of churches: "the search for a 'suitable' church makes the man a critic where the Enemy wants him to be a pupil."³

If we think of ourselves as consumers, we will view ourselves as the audience, and the preacher and others assisting in leading the service (especially the musicians) as performers there to inspire (and perhaps entertain) us, rather than understanding that God is the audience and we are beggars, rebels, and enemies, made heirs, friends, and children of God through the Father's love, the Son's obedience, death, and resurrection, and the Spirit's new birth, and that we have come now, by his grace, to give something to God that he alone deserves and that we can only give him through Jesus Christ, in order that we might be what he made us to be (worshippers) and enjoy what he made us to enjoy: the greatest, deepest, best treasure in all the world (the triune God himself, and communion with him).

So, this is all to say that Matt Merker helps both pastors and people think biblically about congregational worship. He asks us to think about who exactly it is that gathers to worship, the necessity of that gathering, the purpose of our gathering

³C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), 81–82.

(and I loved his threefold consideration of exaltation, edification, and evangelism in that chapter), the content or substance of our gathered worship, the order or structure of our gathering, and our participation in the gathering.

I think you will be helped, as I was, in reading this little book. You may well read it in one sitting, but I believe that you will return to it again, as I already have, and plan to do in days ahead, God willing.

Ligon Duncan
Chancellor/CEO of Reformed Theological Seminary
John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology

SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

In this series, 9Marks has produced short, readable books on each of what Mark has called nine marks of a healthy church—plus a few more. These include books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, sound doctrine, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, church elders, deacons, prayer, missions, and corporate worship.

Series Preface

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman
series editors

SPECIAL THANKS

Thanks are due, first of all, to Capitol Hill Baptist Church. Thank you for all that you taught me about corporate worship by gathering each Lord's Day. I'm grateful to all the elders and members for how you loved, taught, supported, and cared for my family and me for a decade. Thanks to Bobby Jamieson, who encouraged me to pursue this project, rearranged my schedule to help me write, and offered input on the manuscript. And particular thanks to Mark Dever for the investment you have made and continue to make in my life. Your influence permeates this whole book.

Thank you to the wonderful 9Marks staff for your commitment to building healthy churches and for your expert support. Alex Duke transformed this book with his superb editing. Special thanks to Jonathan Leeman for shepherding my initial idea into a completed volume, with lots of advice and improvement along the way.

Thank you to Crossway for your commitment to equipping the broader church with biblical resources and for allowing me to add a contribution to this 9Marks series.

Thanks to the many friends who read part or all of the manuscript and offered valuable feedback: Isaac Adams, Sam Emadi, Amos Evans, Susanna Farmer, Jennifer Gosselin, Drew

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Finally, thank you to my kind and precious family. I love you, and this book is for you. Erica, your delight in worshiping Christ fuels my own. Lena and Isaiah, I pray that Christ would become precious to you, and that you would join the sacred assembly that ever sings his praise.

INTRODUCTION

My mother shook a tambourine. My younger siblings rattled maracas. My hands played a few simple chords on an out-of-tune piano. Together we sang, “Celebrate Jesus, celebrate!”

That’s how every day at Merker Home School Academy began: with “worship.”

I’ve been around church music my whole life. In the Vineyard church in which I grew up, we sang simple choruses of devotion. Then, in the Conservative Baptist church of my teenage years, I found myself unwittingly enlisted in a “worship war”: the organ against the praise band. The band won. This stylistic transition was painful, and quite commonplace in the 1990s. In college, I grew to love hymns both old and new that coupled deep truths with singable melodies. After graduation, I returned to the church of my youth and reenlisted in that praise band.

For decades, I sang to Jesus at home and at Sunday services. I listened to “praise and worship” albums. I led worship services at youth groups, college fellowships, and even vocationally at church.

And yet, I didn’t understand corporate worship.

Then, at twenty-four, I began a pastoral internship. For the first time, I studied what the Bible says about the local

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church. What I found changed me forever. No longer did I regard the church as an optional add-on to the Christian faith, or a place where “really serious” believers got together to grow, or a rally designed to attract outsiders through inspiring experience. The church is the bride for whom Christ died. It is the outpost of his kingdom on earth. It is the temple for his Spirit. It is his body. I recognized these images beforehand, to be sure. But now I started to put them together. I saw they have rich implications for what a church does when it meets.

At the same time, I participated in church gatherings every Sunday that were deeply and deliberately congregational. The whole church wanted to be there. Everyone engaged intently. Folks stayed afterwards for an hour to minister to one another. And the whole church *sang*—more loudly and passionately than I’d ever heard, even though the musical accompaniment was plain and unremarkable.

I realized there’s a connection between how a congregation understands itself to *be* a church, and the way it worships *as* a church.

Needless to say, I stayed around for a while. I made that church, Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, my home for a decade. God used its congregational life—including the worship services I’ve just described—to grow my faith by leaps and bounds.

Why another book on worship? I’ve been asked that question several times. Each time, my answer has been the same: this isn’t a book on worship in general. It’s about *corporate* worship.

To be sure, worship by itself is a worthy topic. We're created to be worshipers of God. There is no one Hebrew word in the Old Testament or one Greek word in the New Testament that translates exclusively as "worship," because the idea is so pervasive. Scripture calls all people to love, serve, obey, exalt, magnify, sing to, ascribe worth to, and bow down before the one true God. Worship, simply put, is the purpose of life. It is "an engagement with [God] on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible."¹ Because Christ offered himself for us, believers now offer him our whole lives—all we think, do, and say—as a worshipful sacrifice (Rom. 12:1).

That's not all, though. A life of worship also involves assembling with God's people. The New Testament commands believers to meet together (Heb. 10:24–25) and gives whole chapters of instruction pertinent to these gatherings (e.g., 1 Corinthians 11–14). A church service is different than when several people who all happen to be Christians get together to play sports or watch a movie. Scripture teaches that there is a time "when you come together *as a church*" (1 Cor. 11:18). The whole gathering is "worship," not just the singing and music. In the preaching, prayers, and everything in between, God ministers to and through the whole congregation for his own glory.

That gathering, that "coming together" of the church, is what this book is about.

My goal is simple. I hope to show that in order to understand corporate worship, we must understand the local church. When we approach the Sunday service with a biblical

¹ David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 20.

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view of the church body, it transforms how we engage in gathered worship. My aim is to put the “corporate” into our corporate worship.

Why does this topic matter? Imagine a group of Christians who are planting a church. Their conversation turns to their hopes and dreams for the Sunday worship gathering.

Brad says that what their church needs is *intimate corporate worship*. He highlights passionate communion with Jesus. “That’s authentic worship,” he says, “when the Spirit brings us to the throne room in awe and adoration.”

Alyssa tells Brad to beware too much focus on personal experience. After all, the Bible calls us to *historic, doctrinal corporate worship*. “We should herald the truth while showing our solidarity with Christians of past generations through ancient creeds and classic hymns.”

Rich agrees with Alyssa to an extent, but he urges his friends to focus on *liturgical corporate worship*. Yes, intimacy and truth both matter, he says, but, when we worship, God forms believers through embodied practices. “We’re physical beings, so we must appreciate how liturgy shapes our desires, how the rituals of the body train the posture of the heart.”

Danielle throws up her hands in frustration. “Guys! Everything you’re talking about sounds so foreign to unbelievers!” She argues for *outreach-driven corporate worship*. Get rid of the smells, bells, and creeds. Let’s play songs our neighbors know, make everything as accessible as possible, and above all, keep the service under an hour.

When we consider how a church should worship, it isn’t always exactly clear which of the above perspectives should

rank highest. No wonder Christians have argued about corporate worship over the generations. Different believers have different priorities, and our varying theological backgrounds and church traditions point us in various directions.

But much of this confusion can be cleared up if we simply *begin with the local church*. What is a church? What does God's Word call churches to do when they gather? Those are the central questions driving this book. As we answer them, we'll find that the four statements above each have a grain of truth. Corporate worship *does* involve communion with Christ by his Spirit, *and* heralding sound doctrine while staying historically rooted, *and* liturgical formation, *and* serving as a witness to the lost. My purpose isn't to identify any of those sound bites as the "correct" one. Rather, it's to show how a deep understanding of the church brings clarity to this conversation.

Here's how we'll get there. First, a biblical view of the church tells us *who* gathers. The nature of the local church shapes what it does when it meets (chapter 1). A biblical understanding of the church also helps us see that churches *must* gather, and that God is the one who gathers us to work in our midst (chapter 2). It then teaches us *why* we gather: unto God's glory, for our mutual good, before the world's gaze (chapter 3).

Then, a biblical view of the local church informs all the practical aspects of putting a worship service together. Our doctrine of the church helps us answer the questions of what we should do when we gather (chapter 4), how we should order the gathering (chapter 5), and what it looks like for the whole church to participate in every element of corporate worship (chapters 6–7).

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You'll notice that I refer a lot to my church in this book. That's because the Lord's Day gatherings at Capitol Hill Baptist Church (CHBC) I've witnessed have sought to fulfill the biblical vision for corporate worship. The church isn't perfect, but it's where I've seen so much about worship faithfully taught and applied.

I'm not encouraging you to make a carbon copy of the corporate worship at CHBC. Corporate worship will look different wherever it takes place. Yet the Bible does address the topic. So I'll seek to talk about core biblical elements of gathered worship that should be present everywhere, even while I also talk about the forms those elements take at CHBC. My hope is that you would glean from CHBC's example as you try to apply the elements of corporate worship faithfully, in the forms that are wisest for your own context. The forms are flexible; the real question I hope this book helps you answer is, *how does our understanding of the church shape how we seek to fulfill the biblical elements of congregational worship?*

Before I finished this book, the Lord saw fit to move my family and me to Nashville, Tennessee, where I'm now working for a Christian organization that publishes hymns and educational material on worship. We've joined a local congregation, Edgefield Church, that gathers for wonderful, Christ-centered corporate services. But most of this book was already done when we moved. So when I refer to "my church" in this book, it's still CHBC I'm talking about. It was through the beloved brothers and sisters of that congregation that the Lord taught me so many invaluable lessons about corporate worship. Their fingerprints are all over this volume.

Finally, who is this book for? It is for Christians. This topic should matter particularly to those involved in planning and leading church gatherings, from pastors and worship leaders to choir directors and musical volunteers. But at the end of the day, as I hope to stress, corporate worship is the responsibility of every church member. Being a believer means gathering with God's people, for God's praise.

So whoever you are, and whatever your role is in the weekly service, I pray that this brief volume will help you connect what the church is to what it *does* in corporate worship.

WHO GATHERS?

Dinnertime is a big deal in my family. It's the main time each day when we pause from all the work, chores, ballet practice, and crayons to focus on one another.

On the surface, our meal probably looks like the one enjoyed by millions of families. But if you watched us, you would notice a few distinct things that make us Merkers—that express our “Merkerness.” For instance, we are believers in Jesus, so we pray and thank God for the food. My wife is Italian-American, so we often eat the most amazing pasta that you've ever tasted. You would notice the inside jokes, the unspoken rules, the family traditions, and the silly antics that make us *us*.

Who we are as a family shapes what we do. Then what we *do* when we gather around the family table shapes who we are. Our meal flows from and reinforces our family identity.

It's different when I eat dinner alone. If the rest of my family is sick or away on a trip, I can consume the same nutrients while watching television and listening to heavy metal. There are fewer dishes and spilled peas to clean up. But—and it's an important “but”—I don't come away with the same wonderful

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afterglow. The meal may feed my belly, but it doesn't bind me to the people I love most.

My hope in this book is to show that worshipping God together as a church is like a family dinner. It's an essentially corporate thing. Christians are called to offer God our whole individual lives as worshipful sacrifices (Rom. 12:1). But when we gather as a congregation, something unique happens: we enjoy Christ, exalt God, and edify one another together as his covenant people.

The whole is more than the sum of the parts.

The nature of the church shapes what corporate worship is. The church's worship, in turn, forms and reinforces our corporate identity. So, in order to understand worship, we need to understand the local church.

Many conversations about worship treat the *how* questions. How do we contextualize? What style of music should we use? Organ or rock band? How loud should the speakers be? These aren't unimportant questions, but if they're the main focus, we'll miss something crucial. The more fundamental question is a *who* question: who is worshipping?¹ Our ecclesiology (our doctrine of the church) and our doxology (our doctrine of worship) shape and reinforce one another.

¹ Of course, there is another vital *who* question: Whom do Christians worship? The answer is the triune God, our Creator and Redeemer, who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. To understand worship, we must know the one true God. Thankfully, many books on worship stress God-centeredness. I'm going to focus on the other *who* question, the question of who's doing the worshipping, because I think it's relatively underappreciated today. For more on the importance of theology proper (the doctrine of God) in worship, see, e.g., Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 61–87; D. A. Carson, "Worship under the Word," in *Worship By the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 26–33; Michael Lawrence and Mark Dever, "Blended Worship," in *Perspectives on Christian Worship: Five Views*, ed. J. Matthew Pinson (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 226–230.

As with my family meals, who we are as a church shapes our gatherings, and our gatherings shape who we are.

THE CORPORATE NATURE OF SALVATION

God has always related to his people not only as individuals but also as a corporate body. In Genesis, he calls both Abraham and his family. In Exodus, he rescues this family, Israel, and makes them “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). What do priests do? They worship. They mediate God’s presence and consecrate what’s holy. By calling the whole people a “kingdom of priests,” God gave them a priestly commission—to be a worshipping, mediating, consecrated people.

The rest of the Old Testament is the history of this nation set apart for God’s glory. Though God would ultimately hold each Israelite responsible for his or her own sin (Ezek. 18:1–20), he dealt with them as a people knit together by his covenant.

It’s no surprise, then, that when Jesus arrives on the scene, he highlights the corporate nature of the people he came to save. “I will build my *church*,” he says (Matt. 16:18). He tells his followers to “*gather* in my name” (Matt. 18:20). Paul affirms that Jesus “died for *us*” (Rom. 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:10). Christ “loved the *church* and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25).

Ephesians 2 is one of the places where Scripture most clearly emphasizes the corporate nature of our salvation. Verses 1 to 10 famously describe how God gives new life by grace to those who trust in Jesus. He reconciles us to himself vertically. But verses 11 to 22 tell the second half of the story, which involves a horizontal reconciliation. Not only were we

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dead in sins and deserving of God's righteous condemnation, we were also "strangers," "alienated" from God's covenant people (vv. 12–13). The good news? "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." And the result in verse 19 is corporate: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

A sinner who repents and trusts in Christ isn't only born again. He's born into a new family. The horizontal follows the vertical.

Peter teaches us the same thing. He makes the receiving of God's mercy parallel with becoming a people, as seen when we reset the verse in poetic format:

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy, but now you have received
mercy. (1 Pet. 2:10)

The two things happen together.

This people, this family, becomes visible today in local churches. Though all believers in all times belong to the heavenly "assembly" of the universal church (Heb. 12:23), Jesus established the local church to show the world who his worshipers are.

That should lead us to ask, what is a church? The early Protestant Reformers answered by pointing to a congregation gathered for the right preaching of the gospel and the proper administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The early Baptists emphasized the "mutual agreement" or covenant

among those gathered. Here's how I would summarize: A local church is an assembly of blood-bought, Spirit-filled worshipers who build one another up by God's Word and affirm one another as citizens of Christ's kingdom through the ordinances.

This means that being a Christian—a worshiper of God—entails identifying with God's worshipping people. You've been adopted into his family. So when you sit down to the dinner table of corporate worship, you don't do so alone. Since salvation is corporate, worship is corporate.

PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

So what is the biblical vision for the church, and how does it inform our understanding of corporate worship? Let's consider three biblical images for the church.²

An Outpost of the Kingdom of Heaven

First, a local church is an outpost of the kingdom of heaven. This image teaches that our corporate worship should demonstrate how we are distinct from the world.

I once rode my bike near RFK Stadium in Washington, DC, during a soccer game. One of the teams was from Honduras, and hundreds of their tailgating fans filled the parking lot. Flags flew. Music blasted. Meat sizzled on the grill. It wasn't an official Honduran outpost, but it seemed that way: a beautifully distinct group of people on foreign soil. I both felt like an

²The Bible contains many images or metaphors for the church. I am focusing on these three because they are especially prominent. For more, see D. J. Tidball, "Church," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 410.

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outsider *and* was attracted to their gathering. I wanted to learn more about their culture (and food!).

In a similar way, a church service is a gathering of “exiles” who belong to the same heavenly country (1 Pet. 1:1). My own congregation consists of people from the United States, Brazil, China, the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, and more. But the New Testament says we are, most fundamentally, “fellow citizens” (Eph. 2:19) of Christ’s “holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9).

In the Old Testament, Israel served as an outpost of God’s rule. Now, the church occupies that role. We are Christ’s ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). He identifies himself with us when we gather in his name (Matt. 18:20). A local congregation is a collection of former outcasts whom the King has justified, brought under his lordship, and empowered to follow his law of justice and love.

This means that a church is a preview of the coming new creation, a “time machine from the future.”³ If you want to see what the society of the redeemed will look like in the new heaven and new earth, you don’t need to look farther than any true church. Visit, for instance, my friend Joshua’s house church in China. Or Faith Baptist Church in Kitwe, Zambia. Or St. Helen’s Bishopsgate, an Anglican church in London. A church is a movie trailer—albeit a flawed and imperfect one—for what God’s kingdom on earth will look like on the final day.

What does this mean for corporate worship? Here are several implications:

³Jonathan Leeman, “We Come in Peace: Churches, Time-Machines and a Gospel Apologetic,” *Primer* 7 (November 2018): 46.

- *We gather as ambassadors, not consumers.* The goal of a worship service is not to entertain or to provide an inspiring experience. It is to honor our King and make him known.
- *We don't "go to church" to worship; we worship because we are the church.* If we treat church merely as an event to attend, we're more likely to slip into a self-centered mindset. We'll rate a service based on how it served us. Yet the Scriptures we've considered show that belonging to a local church is integral to the Christian life. We join and gather because it's who we are. When we worship, we embody—make visible in space and time—our distinct corporate identity.
- *Everything we do in worship should submit to Scripture.* Ambassadors don't set government policy. They faithfully apply it. Similarly, we don't write the script for what to do in a church meeting. We obey the orders our King has given us in his Word.
- *A worship gathering is where we declare heaven's judgments.* Just as an ambassador speaks on behalf of his or her country, the church serves as the mouthpiece for God's kingdom. This isn't just true of our sermons. When we confess our sin in corporate prayer, we tell the world that we assent to God's verdict against us. When we sing a song of praise, we tell the world that we agree with the Father's delight in his Son.
- *When we worship, we exemplify the culture of God's kingdom.* A church is countercultural. Its worship services should be so too. After all, our meetings are like a gathering of exiles on foreign soil. We declare our pledge of allegiance in the creed. We sing our national anthem in the hymns. We teach our constitution in the preaching of the Word. We issue passports (that is, we identify believers as belonging to Christ's kingdom) when we baptize. And we enjoy a foretaste of our future national feast when we take the Lord's Supper. In all

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these ways, we “disrupt” the prevailing culture of our age and disciple believers in the culture of the King.⁴

- *Our worship services should be evangelistic.* Although we shouldn’t cater our meetings to the whims of unbelievers, we should pray that they would attend (1 Cor. 14:24). The gathering should beckon—even command—citizens of the domain of darkness to defect to the kingdom of light: “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20).

To sum it all up: since the church is a foretaste of the new Jerusalem, our worship should exhibit our distinct nationality and the pleasant aroma of heaven. It should focus supremely on Jesus, heaven’s King. It should embody kingdom priorities. Then, as we worship in this way, God further forms us into more faithful subjects under his rule.

A Holy Temple

Second, a local church is a holy temple. The lesson? In our worship we enjoy direct fellowship with God and one another.

God, of course, is omnipresent. He’s everywhere (1 Kings 8:27; Ps. 139:7–10).

Yet at every stage in the storyline of the Bible, God makes his presence specially manifest among his people. He did this first in the garden—the earth’s original temple. Then in the tabernacle in the wilderness. Then in Israel’s temple. Then in the most perfect temple, his Son. And finally, in all those

⁴For the idea that the elements of a worship service are “disruptive” to our culture’s prevailing norms, I’m indebted to Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 133–146.

united to his Son. Paul affirms that each one of our individual bodies is a temple of the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), but he also teaches that we are that temple collectively: “Do you not know that you [plural] are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16; see also Eph 2:22; 1 Pet. 2:5).

Imagine that. God delighted to manifest his special covenant presence in the flawed, messy churches of the New Testament. Amazingly, he does the same among us today.

I was a music major in college. One day, the administration emailed to say there would be an “open rehearsal,” and music students were welcome to attend. Who was rehearsing? Oh, no big deal—only Béla Fleck (one of the best banjo players in the world) and Edgar Meyer (one of the best bassists in the world).

We all rushed to the rehearsal hall to hear these musical giants. The atmosphere was totally different than usual. Instead of a mess of instruments, sheet music, and backpacks, we found neat rows of chairs. Instead of chattering noisily, we waited in hushed silence. Why? Because of the presence of greatness.

Their presence had an effect on our relationships as well. “You’re a fan, too?” students asked one another. Petty rivalries vanished as the atmosphere grew more festive. For two hours, we were all best friends—united by the presence of two figures we revered.

When the church gathers, we encounter the presence of someone far greater than any musician. Like that rehearsal I attended, the presence of Greatness transforms the relationships of those who are there. Spirit-filled people set aside their worldly differences to worship together as family, “with one voice” (Rom. 15:6).

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What does this mean for corporate worship? We can draw several lessons:

- *God's dwelling place has a congregational shape.* If we hope to encounter God's presence when we come to church, we ought to expect to find him in and with one another, rather than primarily in our own personal feelings and intuitions. A church service isn't mainly the place for me to have a souped-up, private "quiet time." It's the place for me to meet God by meeting with his Spirit-filled people.
- *Corporate worship must never be anonymous.* If we are God's temple, then a Christian service is, by definition, a communal affair. Unlike going to a movie, where you try not to notice who is sitting next to you, at church we warmly greet one another because we share the same Spirit. We hear the voices of brothers and sisters we know by name as songs, prayers, and Scriptures reverberate around us. Rather than slipping out of our seats to leave during the final song, we stick around for fellowship. Those whom the world divides by ethnicity, class, or nationality unite together with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16)—or at least a holy side-hug!
- *Corporate worship is priestly ministry to other believers.* Peter writes, "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5). When we gather for worship, we all play a priestly role. We offer two types of sacrifice: praise to God (Heb. 13:15); and good works to bless God's people (Heb. 13:16). We minister both vertically to the Lord and horizontally to one another when the church gathers.
- *The real "action" is in the pew, not on the platform (which we often wrongly think of as a "stage").* We should be grate-

ful for everyone whom God equips to facilitate our public worship. They are Spirit-filled priests. But so are we. I fear that too often evangelicals view the church as a place where the worship on a “stage” washes over the rest of us like an emotional force field. It’s as if we want to replicate a concert venue, or like we’re after the experience of a Roman Catholic mass, where sacramental grace flows down to the people from the altar, via the priests. Yet that’s not how we should view a church’s worship service. Since we are God’s temple, church members already enjoy union with Christ and one another by his Spirit. The pew is the platform. We are a kingdom of priests offering praise to our God, through the sole mediation of Christ.

In our corporate worship, we enjoy fellowship with God and one another. And as we worship, God’s Spirit further forms us as priests who serve him and one another with joy.

The Body of Christ

How often do I wander into church with low spirits and tired eyes! One such Sunday I looked up as the singing began. Across the room I saw my friend Jeremy. Though he was singing to God, he was doing so in a way that made it seem like he was also singing . . . at me. And probably at everyone else, too. It wasn’t fake or forced. He simply sang in a way that invited others to join him:

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see him there
Who made an end to all my sin.⁵

⁵Charitie Lees Bancroft (1841–1923), “Before the Throne of God Above,” 1863.

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Amazingly, mysteriously, the Lord used Jeremy's facial expression to press the truth of that song into my heart. I started to sing along.

That brings us to our third portrait. A local church is the body of Christ. The lesson in this image is that in our worship, we should aim at mutual edification that results in unity.

In one sense, Christ's "body" is the universal church throughout space and time (e.g., Eph. 1:22–23). Yet there's another sense in which each local congregation *embodies* Christ on earth. A church is made up of those who are united to Christ by faith and so are united to one another, with Christ as their head. As Paul tells the Corinthian church, "Now you [plural] are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27).

What do bodies do? They grow. They receive nourishment. They fight disease. Every member is an invaluable part of the whole (see 1 Corinthians 12). And every part helps "build up" every other part (Eph. 4:12).

That term "build up" occurs several times in 1 Corinthians 14, the most extended discussion in Scripture about what a church should do when it gathers:

- Verse 5: "The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be *built up*."
- Verse 12: "So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in *building up* the church."
- Verse 26: "What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for *building up*."

In sum, since a church is the body of Christ, edification should be at the center of a church's meeting.⁶

What does this mean for corporate worship?

- *We gather to edify and to be edified.* A “lone ranger” Christian is like a detached prosthetic limb. Our corporate worship should undermine self-centeredness. We come to be built up because we desperately need it—just as I needed Jeremy’s encouragement that day. Yet also, in God’s providence, other members need us to come and build them up too. We are simultaneously doctors and patients in God’s hospital, binding up others’ wounds and receiving the medicine our own souls need.
- *Corporate worship is discipleship.* God calls church members to minister to one another by speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:12–15). We often imagine that taking place in small group Bible studies, one-on-one discipling relationships, and informal fellowship. And it does. But a church service is one of the primary settings in which believers speak the truth to one another. When we recite a creed, or read Scripture aloud together, or sing a Psalm, or vocalize “amen” after a prayer, we’re not just following the service leader’s directions. We are discipling one another and building up the body to maturity.

⁶The priority on edification in 1 Corinthians 12–14 also helps churches put debates about so-called “charismatic gifts” of the Holy Spirit (a misnomer, because all the Spirit’s gifts are given according to his *charis*, his grace) into proper context. Whether a church concludes that gifts such as speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, prophecy, etc., should be expected today or not, the point is that all such gifts are meant to glorify Christ by *building up* the whole body. For an excellent defense of a “nuanced cessationism” position, which argues that certain gifts largely ceased with the completion of the New Testament canon, see Thomas Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter* (Nashville: B&H, 2018). Though I hold to Schreiner’s view, a strong argument for the continuation of such gifts today is presented by Andrew Wilson in *Spirit and Sacrament: An Invitation to Eucharistic Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

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- *Corporate worship should both reflect and contribute to a church's unity.* In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul teaches that every church member is essential. Not only has God given us each different gifts. He also intends for us to display his power through the supernatural unity we enjoy: “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). This unity will make itself evident in a spirit of hospitality: those who have more power or privilege in this world will look for opportunities to serve and welcome those who have been oppressed or who are suffering. This unity will show up when members sing along gladly with songs that may not be in their favorite style, because they know the songs bring comfort to brothers or sisters who are older or younger than they are or who come from a different cultural background.

Since a church is the body of Christ, we worship as a unified whole. And our worship in turn further forms us into the mature, united people Christ calls us to be.

CONCLUSION

I'd much rather eat dinner with my family than alone. Our gathering at the table is one place where we showcase our distinct corporate identity. It's where we fellowship with one another. It's where we nourish and build one another up with the goal of greater unity.

As we've seen, it's the same with the local church. Our corporate worship is a feast. Christ himself hosts us at his banquet table. We gather in his honor to delight in the richest of fare. And he expects us to meet together, as one family. We are the outpost of his kingdom, the temple of his Spirit, the body he is nurturing toward maturity.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CORPORATE WORSHIP IN THE CHURCH?

Christians worship God at church every week, but many don't know exactly what worship is or why they do it. For some, it's a warm-up for the sermon. For others, it's a "me-and-Jesus" moment. What is the biblically informed way to view corporate worship?

In this book, Matt Merker shows that corporate worship is the gathering of God's people by his grace, for his glory, for their good, and before a watching world. He offers biblical insights and practical suggestions for making worship what it truly is meant to be: a foretaste of God's people worshipping together for eternity in the new creation.

"Matt shows pastors, music leaders, and all of us how to keep our focus on the Bible's priorities for corporate worship. We warmly commend this book."

KEITH AND KRISTYN GETTY, hymn writers and authors, Northern Ireland and Nashville, Tennessee

"Packed with both doctrine and counsel that will help the reader press toward a more Scripture-shaped vision for corporate worship."

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"This brief but significant book will help you understand the nature of corporate worship in a biblical sense."

MIGUEL NÚÑEZ, pastor, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

"Merker brings to us in a refreshing way a truth about the church that we often take for granted: namely, that the church is a gathered community for the purpose of worshipping God."

CONRAD MBEWE, pastor, Lusaka, Zambia

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