

A COMPREHENSIVE AND PRACTICAL
GUIDE TO PASTORAL MINISTRY

The
PASTOR'S
BOOK



R. KENT HUGHES

DOUGLAS SEAN O'DONNELL

Contributing Editor

“Everyday Latin phrases spring to mind to describe *The Pastor’s Book*. It is a *magnum opus*—a major work for all ministers, incorporating one and a half lifetimes of gathered pastoral resources. It will be a *vade mecum*—the go-to book and faithful companion for younger ministers, to guide, inform, and sometimes correct and restrain. It should prove to be a *sine qua non* for all who are engaged in gospel ministry over the long haul—the very book needed to help recalibrate and refresh. These pages constitute a love gift to their fellow undershepherds from Kent Hughes and Douglas Sean O’Donnell. They have put all who love Christ’s church in their lasting debt.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Professor of Systematic Theology, Redeemer Seminary,
Dallas, Texas

“This is an immensely helpful, Scripture-saturated resource for busy pastors, explaining the practical ‘how to’s’ of leading weddings, funerals, baptisms, the Lord’s Supper, personal counseling, and weekly worship services. It reflects the accumulated wisdom of decades of ministry, and it comes from the pen of a godly, wise senior pastor for whom I have the highest appreciation and respect.”

Wayne Grudem, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies,
Phoenix Seminary

“*The Pastor’s Book* should be on the shelf of every young preacher heading out into gospel ministry. It is a resource volume—meant to guide you into good practice and provide you with language for a variety of pastoral settings. Its success comes from the authors’ mutual hallmark of disciplined and careful preparation. With this book, they have been kind enough to do some of the heavy lifting for us as well!”

David R. Helm, Pastor, Holy Trinity Church, Chicago; Chairman,
The Charles Simeon Trust

“This is an invaluable resource for every pastor or church leader, at whatever stage of life and ministry. Full of biblical and theological insights, practical applications, and excellent examples, it will become an essential companion and guide for a multitude of ministry opportunities and challenges.”

David Jackman, Former President, Proclamation Trust, London, United Kingdom

“Veteran pastors Kent Hughes and Douglas O’Donnell have given to us a wonderful, biblically anchored, gospel-centered resource. This is an invaluable, go-to treasure for busy pastors. From invocations to benedictions and from weddings to funerals, this volume is a very helpful guide in confidently exercising our duties as ministers of the gospel. What a gift!”

Crawford W. Loritts Jr., Senior Pastor, Fellowship Bible Church, Roswell,
Georgia; author, *A Passionate Commitment*

“I wish I had had this book when I began my ministry as a pastor! It pulls back the curtain to show us what we need to know about our calling and the expectations of our people. It gives a breadth and context to pastoral responsibilities I’ve not seen in other similar books.”

Erwin W. Lutzer, Senior Pastor, The Moody Church, Chicago, Illinois

“*The Pastor’s Book* is a remarkable resource, forged over four decades of Hughes’s pastoral experience. It is historically informed, biblically grounded, thoroughly Christ-centered, and eminently practical. This is a book that the new pastor and the veteran minister alike will return to again and again as they press through the crucible of pastoral ministry.”

Aaron Messner, Senior Minister, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

“Pastors must be prepared for almost any imaginable situation. From weekly sermons and counseling to hospital visitations and funerals, the pastoral tasks vary from day to day, even from hour to hour. Kent Hughes provides the type of theologically rich handbook every minister needs on his shelf. Hughes is a sagacious guide to the many facets of pastoral ministry, and his program for ministry is deeply rooted in Scripture. I am confident that pastors will be greatly served by this book and better equipped for faithful ministry in every avenue of life.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“I can only imagine the benefits I would have received if I had been given this book on my ordination day. I not only look forward to having my own copy, but also to securing copies for the young men I have the privilege of mentoring for the gospel ministry. *The Pastor’s Book* is a well-written and comprehensive compendium on pastoral ministry. Get it and use it, and may our Lord’s church again be blessed by ministers called of God who give themselves to ‘the ministry of prayer and the Word.’”

Harry L. Reeder III, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

“Whether you are a newly minted pastor or a veteran, you will find this all-in-one resource for pastoral ministry a very helpful book. This book will actually remind pastors there are many wonderful resources to draw upon, all of which equip us to biblically minister in the various roles and contexts we find ourselves pastoring within.”

Jay Thomas, Lead Pastor, Chapel Hill Bible Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

“Veteran pastor and author Kent Hughes has written what will surely prove to be one of the most widely used and useful guides to pastoral ministry available to young pastors. As I read through this volume, I was struck over and over again by the practical wisdom, measured assessment, and confident admonition that could come only from one who has pastored—and pastored thoughtfully and well—for many years. The benefit this book will be for pastors and their churches is incalculable. What a gift this is.”

Bruce A. Ware, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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B O O K

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To
Barbara Hughes
and
Emily O'Donnell

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Preface

When Dr. Lane Dennis, president of Crossway Books, asked me to consider authoring what is now *The Pastor's Book*, I was intrigued, but unsure of what course to follow. So in the following weeks, I began to reflect over my forty-plus years of pastoral ministry and upon those responsibilities that filled my week, as well as my duties on the Lord's Day. When Doug O'Donnell agreed to serve as contributing editor, my thinking was enlarged.

Having been busy pastors during our tenures, we hope to encourage and enhance the gospel ministries of our fellow busy pastors with the rich theology and resources that have sustained our own ministries. Thus, we have worked together to create a go-to resource that stands on the shoulders of those who have gone before, is theologically informed, and is crammed full of examples and ideas from which a pastor can selectively cull with an eye to elevating not only the weekly ministry of the Word in both contemporary and traditional settings, but the day-to-day pastoral ministry of the gospel.

We have limited the material we cover for various reasons. We wanted to center on pastoral tasks we have thought a lot about and that we feel are often neglected or overlooked, especially by the younger generation of pastors. We also thought that addressing many important topics, such as calling to ministry, personal character, family life, preaching, leading a pastoral staff, working with elders, church discipline, and church planting, would make this large go-to book too bulky to go to. Moreover, we know that excellent books and articles already have been written on each of these topics. We offer recommendations for some of these books in the section titled "Books for Further Reading."

A brief look at the chapter on Communion will give an idea of how the book's chapters work, as it includes a history of the Lord's Table, a biblical theology of the Table, resources for the Table (numerous invitations, prayers, and confessions for Communion; prayers for the bread and the cup; and benedictions), the outlines of four key Reformation liturgies, the

complete texts of three Communion liturgies for today, select hymns and songs for Communion, a liturgy for Christmas Communion, and advice on questions about the frequency of and participation in the Lord's Table. The information is arranged so that a pastor may select elements that will elevate the observance of the Lord's Supper in the unique context of the church he serves. Hopefully, this and the other chapters will often serve as an inspiring one-stop resource for many busy pastors.

The Pastor's Book is grounded on the conviction that all Christian ministry must be gospel-centered. We believe, therefore, that the pulpit must be devoted to the regular proclamation of the full canonical gospel—"that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). We believe that such preaching is at the heart of authentic ministry.

But to imagine that Christian ministry is accomplished solely by the faithful exposition of the Word is to diminish the expansive scope of the gospel and the pastoral calling, because the day-in-and-day-out ministry of the pastor is meant to be wholly gospel-infused. Take, for example, the responsibility for weddings—a duty that is often regarded by pastors as a waste of time, an ecclesial diversion from "the main thing." Time-consuming, yes! But a wedding is not a waste if the gospel is made so integral to premarital counseling that the bride and groom go on to portray, over the decades, the union of Christ and the church to a lost world. Likewise, time has not been siphoned from "the main thing" when the gospel is winsomely preached from a Christ-saturated wedding text to a "captive" gathering of souls that may include more non-Christians than will darken the door of the church in a month of Sundays. Indeed, properly understood, the day-to-day responsibilities of the pastor covered in the chapters on weddings, funerals, pastoral counseling, and hospital visitation all have to do with gospel events. All these chapters feature numerous templates and options.

This book argues and assumes that Sunday services will be gospel-centered through regular preaching that lifts up Christ through the exposition of the Word, and thus provides diverse orders of service that serve to exalt Christ. The book includes extended chapters on Sunday prayers; historic creeds; hymns and songs; baptism; and Communion, plus an "Enrichment" section on classic Christian poems—all crafted to enhance the exaltation of Christ in the Lord's Day services. Again, each of these chapters contains multiple examples and options.

The chapter on annual services necessarily follows the outline of the gospel—Christmas, Messiah's birth; Good Friday, Messiah's death; Easter,

Messiah's resurrection—providing orders of service and appropriate Scripture quotations, songs, and poems for each season of the gospel. A perusal of the detailed table of contents will acquaint the reader with the array of resources included in each of the eleven chapters and the appendix.

It is our hope that *The Pastor's Book* will:

- encourage a thoroughly gospel-centered ministry;
- refresh the church from the wells of historic orthodoxy;
- provide many of the best practical examples; and
- become a go-to resource for busy pastors.

Acknowledgments

Douglas O'Donnell, now senior lecturer in biblical studies and practical theology at Queensland Theological College in Brisbane, who serves as this book's contributing editor, is a man of many talents. He is the founding pastor of two churches, an accomplished Bible expositor, and an expert in biblical Wisdom Literature, having authored *The Beginning and End of Wisdom: Preaching Christ from the First and Last Chapters of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job*; the Preaching the Word commentaries *The Song of Solomon: An Invitation to Intimacy* and *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*; and the Reformed Expository Commentary volumes *Ecclesiastes: Enjoyment East of Eden* and *1–3 John: A Gospel-Transformed Life*. In addition, he has written *God's Lyrics: Recovering Worship through Old Testament Songs*, in which he includes some of his own original songs. Doug contributed three chapters to this book, "Sunday Worship," "The Historic Christian Creeds," and "Hymns and Songs," as well as the last half of the chapter on baptism, and he made many other additions and improvements. I am grateful not only for his contributions, but also for his patience, humor, wit, and elevated style, all of which have made this a better book.

I must also express my appreciation to my longtime friend, Milton scholar, and prodigious author Dr. Leland Ryken, retired Wheaton College professor of English, who researched and selected some of the finest Christian poems in the English language for inclusion in the enrichment section titled "Poetry to Enhance Worship and Preaching," and also supplied select poems for Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter, and the love poems and epithalamia for weddings. Lee's work will enrich many a wedding, special service, and sermon, and will grace some grateful hearts.

Deepest thanks must go to another close friend, Dr. Bob Evans, pastor of Christ Church in Pleasanton, California, for the superb chapter on pastoral counseling. Also, I have deep appreciation for Chuck King, who collaborated with me as music pastor for many years at College Church and is architect

of many of the beautiful orders of service in the “Annual Services” chapter. Special thanks go to Tom Buck, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Lindale, Texas, for his baptism protocols and liturgies; Dr. Niel Nielson, for his confirmation liturgy; Dr. Matt Newkirk, for a number of the congregational prayers; K. Edward Copeland, for providing New Zion Baptist Church’s order of service; and Dr. Gary Rownd, for allowing us to print his wonderful song “Gift from the Lord.” Lastly, I am so grateful to those who provided the many homilies, as noted in the following pages: Tom Buck, Bob Evans, Randall Gruendyke, W. Carey Hughes, Arthur Jackson, Jim Johnston, Jay Thomas, and Todd Wilson.

This book was written during the early months of 2014 in Jupiter, Florida, where my wife, Barbara, and I wintered as I taught at The Expositor’s Seminary on the campus of Grace Immanuel Bible Church. I am most grateful to the seminary’s dean, Bob Whitney, for doing everything possible to make our stay pleasant and productive, and to Pastor Dr. Jerry Wragg, for his superb expositions and corporate worship under the direction of Dr. Dan Kreider, who provided his personal canon for many of the hymns in this book. Indeed, these pastors modeled much of what *The Pastor’s Book* is about. Barbara and I must also express our gratitude to Jim and Sandy Koepnick, for opening their remarkable home to us during those warm winter months.

Many thanks also go to Dr. Lane Dennis and the editorial staff of Crossway Books, including Ted Griffin and Greg Bailey, for their superb, painstaking editing of this volume.

PART 1

CHRISTIAN GATHERINGS

Sunday Worship

By Douglas Sean O'Donnell

In this opening chapter, we will consider various aspects of what is undoubtedly the highest calling of the church—worship of our great God.

I should warn you—Kent has Quaker roots, and I Roman Catholic. What a former Quaker and Roman Catholic might together say about worship in the free-church evangelical tradition warrants careful and cautionary reading. Kent's first memory of Christianity is the 1949 Los Angeles Billy Graham crusade. His Southern Baptist grandmother took him to the huge tent set up on the corner of Washington and Hill Streets. "The dressed-up crowd, the young evangelist's blue eyes radiating in the spotlights, and cowboy Stuart Hamblen singing 'Just a Closer Walk with Thee'" are a few of the memories etched in his mind.¹ After the crusade, Kent attended Vermont Avenue Presbyterian Church. Of that experience, he recalls, "It was there, hushed and seated with my mother along with other reverent worshippers in the dark, Scottish-kirk ambience of that old church, that I began to sense the transcendence of God and to be drawn to Christ."²

Christ drew Kent to himself in a saving way as a teenager through the Christians at Granada Heights Friends Church. While this was a Quaker congregation, the worship style was eclectic, blending aspects from free-church traditions such as the Methodists, Nazarenes, and Baptists. The church's "liturgy" looked like that of many evangelical services today: a season of congregational singing (including gospel songs and choruses, with

¹R. Kent Hughes, "Free Church Worship: The Challenge of Freedom," in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 136.

²Ibid.

perhaps a hymn and a choir number) followed by a sermon. It did, however, include a short time of silence, a vestige from the Quakers' traditional silent meetings. One aspect of worship this congregation was not silent about was evangelism! And like his church, Kent regarded evangelism as the Christian's highest calling. However, this emphasis, as God-ordained and honoring as it was, deemphasized, as least in Kent's mind, the purpose of corporate worship. He reflects: "I certainly never gave any thought as to the purpose of our Lord's Day gatherings, other than as a venue for preaching."³ Even his embrace of Calvinism before seminary never led him to theological reflection on worship.

It was only after seminary, as Kent served as a youth pastor and then church planter, that serious reflection began. Hughes described the atmosphere from which his many thoughtful questions, such as, "Is this authentic worship or entertainment?" arose:

Irreverence became widespread. Congregational prayers were often a mindless stream-of-consciousness offered in a "kicked-back" cannabis tone. Mantra-like music was employed to mesmerize worshippers, and preachers were replaced by "communicators" who offered bromides strung together with a series of relational anecdotes.⁴

During his twenty-seven years as the senior pastor at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, Kent's philosophy and practice of congregational worship was honed. He has thought long and hard about answers to questions such as:

- What do the Scriptures have to say about corporate worship?
- Is our worship Christ-centered and God-honoring?
- How should the Bible be read, sung, and preached?
- Should we use creeds?
- How do we celebrate the sacraments?

In what follows, I have summarized some of his thoughts and added my own.

To say something of my path to serious reflection on the topic of corporate worship, I will simply add that the nineteen years I spent at St. Philip the Apostle Catholic Parish, two years at Willow Creek Community Church,

³Ibid., 137. For more on Kent's upbringing, see Randy Gruendyke, "Disciplines of a Godly Minister: A Biographical Sketch," in *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 258–262.

⁴Hughes, "Free Church Worship," 137–138.

and nearly twenty years as a pastor/church planter with College Church all influenced me, with the emphasis of influence falling on the latter. My times at College Church and its church plants—Holy Trinity in Chicago, Christ the King in Batavia, Illinois, and New Covenant in Naperville, Illinois, where I helped develop various orders of service, write a philosophy of music, and plan and execute special services—refined my own thoughts on the matter. To see if I'll advocate a blend of the sign of the cross, a splash of holy water, smooth jazz soloists, comfortable auditorium seating, expository preaching, and "A Mighty Fortress" on the organ, you'll have to read on.

WORSHIP—ALL OF LIFE AND EVERY SUNDAY

Kent and I have both been to Oz and back—the island of Australia, that is. In fact, I am there now, serving as a lecturer at Queensland Theological College in Brisbane. Our major Oz influence, however, comes from the Sydney Anglicans, especially those associated with Moore Theological College. Kent credits Graeme Goldsworthy, William Dumbrell, Peter Jensen, and Phillip Jensen, among others, for clarifying his view that worship is more than what happens on Sunday. In the New Testament, worship clearly embodies all of life!

The biblical evidence is conclusive. Jesus's coming fulfilled Scripture's promise of a new covenant (cf. Jer. 31:31–34). And it is most significant that the entire text of this substantial prophecy is recorded in Hebrews 8:7–13, in the midst of a section (Hebrews 7–11) that asserts there is no longer any earthly sacrifice, priesthood, or temple because all have been fulfilled in Christ. There are no longer any sacred times or sacred places. Under the new covenant, Christians are thus to worship all the time—in their individual lives, in their family lives, and when they come together for corporate worship. Corporate worship, then, is a particular expression of a life of perpetual worship. This is what worship is: "Day-in-day-out living for Christ, the knees and heart perpetually bent in devotion and service."⁵

Thus, with the New Testament perspective in mind, as Christians we must center our worship on Christ as the temple, priest, and sacrifice; and we must reject traditions that advocate for sacred spaces—"sanctuaries," "tabernacles," and such—as well as for an ordained "priesthood," along with any elements of the levitical cultus of Aaronic vestments, altars, and bloodless sacrifices.

That said, the designated place where Christians worship is, in some

⁵Ibid., 139–140.

sense, set apart. It is not a *sanctified* place, but it is a *special* place—whether it is St. Paul’s London or the DuPage Children’s Museum (where my church worshiped for a number of months before we moved into another rented space). Moreover, while we embrace the priesthood of all believers, we recognize that a church is not a church without appointed leaders (elders and deacons), as the Pastoral Epistles make clear. Lastly, individual devotion does not negate gathering on the Lord’s Day to worship the risen Lord until his return. We should make it our habit to gather to encourage one another (see Heb. 10:25), each person prepared to build others up (1 Cor. 14:26), knowing that Sunday through Saturday, as brothers, we are called “to present *your* [plural] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is *your* [plural] spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1).

But why do we gather on Sunday? The New Testament, perhaps surprisingly, speaks little on this issue. The emphasis of the New Testament is on mutual edification, as is clear in Hebrews 10:25 (“encouraging one another”), 1 Corinthians 14:26 (“When you come together. . . . Let all things be done for building up”), and the gatherings described in Acts. Evangelism is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14. The hope of a Spirit-filled assembly would be the “unbeliever or outsider . . . falling on his face,” worshiping God, and declaring that “God is really among you” (vv. 24–25).⁶ Beyond edification and evangelism is the obvious: exaltation! If the church’s desire is that the unbeliever “worship God” (v. 25), then there is little doubt the believers should be on their faces before God as well. Views that advocate that corporate assemblies are merely to edify believers or evangelize unbelievers miss the plain fact that if Christ is not lifted up in praise, no believer is edified and no unbeliever is saved. When the New Testament speaks of God’s people gathering to pray (to God), sing (to God), and preach (God’s gospel), it assumes exaltation. Christian worship encompasses the threefold goal of edification, evangelism, and exaltation. And those three aspects of public worship intersect and support each other on many levels.⁷ From our

⁶In a broader sense, Douglas Wilson describes the effect in this way: “As we gather in the presence of the living God on the Lord’s Day, He is pleased to use our right worship of Him as a battering ram to bring down all the citadels of unbelief in our communities. Just as the walls of Jericho fell before the worship and service of God, so unbelievers tremble when Christians gather in their communities to worship the living God rightly.” *A Primer on Worship and Reformation: Recovering the High Church Puritan* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2008), 32.

⁷In his excellent study of the biblical theology of worship, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), David Peterson argues that edification and evangelism emerge “as a priority for those concerned to offer to God ‘acceptable worship’” (188). By those means, we engage with the true and living God on his terms “and in the way that he alone makes possible” (20). Peterson likewise acknowledges the importance of exaltation. In his chapter on the book of Revelation, he writes, “the Revelation to John stresses the importance of praise and acclamation as a means of honouring God and encouraging his people to trust him and obey him” (279). However, with that said, he does summarize “the purpose of Christian gatherings” to be edification (287).

acclamation of God, the church is built up, and unbelievers tremble and (Lord willing) trust! As Hughes puts it:

I have come to see that while all of life is worship, gathered worship with the body of Christ is at the heart of a life of worship. Corporate worship is intended by God to inform and elevate a life of worship. In this respect, I personally view how we conduct gathered worship as a matter of life and death.⁸

CLARIFYING CORPORATE CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

“Life and death”? Those are strong words. What does it matter how we conduct our Sunday worship service? As long as “all things [are] done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40), aren’t all aspects of our edification/evangelism/exaltation liturgy acceptable? Before I answer that important question, a history lesson is necessary. (You can blame this excursus on me and my church history obsession and education, or on Kent, whose work I’m hanging the following thoughts upon.)⁹

The free-church tradition—of which the majority of our readers are a part (just an educated guess)—grew from a protest against Protestant traditions ungrounded in Scripture. In early seventeenth-century England, groups labeled “Puritans” and “Separatists” desired to worship according to the Word. Even though Thomas Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer bled Bible, there was reason for reform. “What does the Word of God say about worship?” was a legitimate question. The Puritans wanted to explore what God’s *pure* revelation said; Separatists (some Anglican Puritans included) wanted to *separate* from England’s official but not God-ordained religion. The Church of England was not *the* church. Their critique, summarized with seven points, involved divergent views of (1) preaching, (2) Scripture, (3) prayer, (4) singing, (5) sacraments, (6) simplicity, and (7) vestments. In brief, they advocated the following changes:

1. As opposed to simply reading the Prayer Book homilies on diverse topics and for various occasions within the church calendar, they argued that preaching should be a plain, passionate, and orderly exposition of a biblical text created by the preacher and applicable to every congregant.
2. Instead of the few small assigned readings for the day from the lectionary of the Book of Common Prayer, larger sections of Scripture should

⁸Hughes, “Free Church Worship,” 142.

⁹The following is my summary of Hughes’s section “The Irony of Freedom,” in *ibid.*, 142–146.

- be read. On most occasions, these passages should relate directly to the preacher's sermon.
3. Instead of reading the collects (short prayers) from the Prayer Book, ministers were encouraged to offer their own (often lengthy) prayers, which were either written down or prayed extemporaneously.
 4. As opposed to having a professional choir singing choral pieces *on behalf of* the congregation, the voice of the congregation was desired, and thus simpler, singable congregational hymns were introduced and sung.
 5. Dismissing extrabiblical traditions such as kneeling for Communion and giving the baptized child the sign of the cross, an emphasis on Paul's words of institution (1 Cor. 11:23–25) for the Lord's Supper and a return to the connection of faith to baptism were advocated.
 6. Against the pomp of the high-church liturgy and the extravagance of Anglican ecclesial architecture, there was a call for simplicity in liturgical and architectural styles.
 7. While not completely or in totality (some Puritan pastors wore the simple Geneva gowns), clerical vestments were rejected in favor of more simple attire, if any special attire at all.

Those of us in the free-church tradition worship in the liturgical world created by these reformers. While we should be respectful and appreciative of other Christian traditions (Cranmer's Prayer Book is incredibly thoughtful and rich), we should also celebrate these changes. The freedom to dress like the people in our congregations, structure the service with biblical simplicity, pray our own heartfelt words, preach our own expositional sermons from Bible texts, and administer the sacraments according to the clear dictates of the Word are reasons to rejoice.

However, there is little doubt today that these freedoms have been abused, and the freedom to worship according to the Word has deteriorated into the freedom to do what works. Pragmatism, not Biblicism, rules the day! From Charles Finney's "new measures" revivals of the nineteenth century to Bill Hybels's seeker-sensitive services of recent years, many evangelical churches do what is right in their own eyes. The regulative principle (that we worship based on biblical prescriptions)¹⁰ regulates few independent evangelical churches today. Between the new cultuses of authentic spontaneity and programmatic anthropocentrism, we must find a scriptural center.

¹⁰As summarized by John Calvin: "God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his word." *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1844), 17.

TWO OLD TESTAMENT PICTURES: PARADIGMS, POSTURES, AND PURPOSES

What does God’s Word say about corporate worship? We also can ask the question this more focused way: What scriptural characteristics help control Christian worship? The answer can be a hundredfold! There are many scriptural principles, practices, and paradigms we should use to guide us, such as: our worship should be Trinitarian (“Father-focused, Christ-centered, and Spirit-enabled”),¹¹ reflective of God’s transcendence and immanence in balance, and salvation-celebratory as we focus on the life, death, resurrection, and return of Christ. Moreover, our worship should be exclusive (we worship Yahweh alone, not alongside other gods), dependent on God’s initiative (we love God because he first loved us), eye-opening, heart-expanding, and mind-renewing. Or we can simply follow Terry Johnson’s excellent summary that worship that is reformed according to the Bible is simple, spiritual, and substantial:

[It is] *simple* because the New Testament does not describe a complex ritual of service as is found in the Old Testament; *spiritual* because when Jesus removed the special status of Jerusalem as *the* place where God was to be worshiped (Jn 4:7–24), He signaled the abolition of all the material forms that constituted the typological Old Testament system including not only the city, but all that gave the city significance—the temple, the altars, the priests, the sacrificial animals, and the incense; *substantial* because the God of the Bible is a great God and cannot be worshiped appropriately with forms that are light, flippant, or superficial; He must always be worshiped with “reverence and awe” (Heb 12:28).¹²

With all that is said above duly noted, perhaps the two most glaring omissions in the contemporary free-church tradition are (1) the fear of God and (2) the Word of God read, sung, prayed, and preached. When you can bet your Cadillac that there will be greater reverence (“godly fear,” Westminster Confession of Faith 21.5) and more Bible reading(s), songs, and prayers at the local Roman Catholic Church than at the Bible church, you know something is terribly amiss. A new reformation is in order! We must protest all Protestantism that will not tremble before God as we listen to his

¹¹J. 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 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 62.

¹²Terry L. Johnson, ed., *Leading in Worship: A Sourcebook for Presbyterian Students and Ministers Drawing from the Biblical and Historical Forms of the Reformed Tradition* (Powder Springs, GA: Tolle Lege, 2013), 9.

voice proclaimed. We must return to bibliocentric, God-fearing worship that exalts, edifies, and evangelizes.

If by God's sovereign grace liturgical reformation is to sweep through the contemporary free churches, a return to their Protestant liturgical traditions (which is a return to the Word) is in order. In *Worship Reformed according to Scripture*, Hughes Oliphant Old lists fifteen of "the most valuable worship traditions at the heart of the heritage of Reformed Protestantism." The first involves preaching the Bible: "At the head of the list should certainly be expository preaching. This has always been the glory of Protestant worship." The final valued tradition, but certainly not the least, involves our attitude: "The greatest single contribution that the Reformed liturgical heritage can make to contemporary American Protestantism is its sense of the majesty and sovereignty of God, its sense of reverence and simple dignity, its conviction that worship must above all serve the praise of God."¹³ For these two often neglected characteristics of worship under the new covenant—(1) bibliocentric, (2) God-fearing worship—I will, ironically enough, explore two Old Testament texts. We will then conclude by answering how these characteristics and others listed above play out in our Sunday gatherings. We begin with Ecclesiastes 5:1–7.¹⁴

GOD-REVERING

Many years ago, I went to a wealthy suburban church that had sermon titles such as "What Would Jesus Say to Bart Simpson?" and that, for its youth day, had its teenagers stream down the aisles dressed like inner-city gang members as they rapped out the opening "hymn," with the appropriate ganglike hand gestures. More recently, I attended a church that showed hilarious homemade video clips to season the sermonette. I have also heard about a church that hands out free popcorn as you enter the "sanctuary," and another where everyone bounces around a beach ball during the "worship" band's performance. Although these examples are perhaps extreme, they show a growing trend. Today, as our churches overflow with folksy entertainment and raw "authenticity," we live in one of the most sacrilegious and blasphemous church cultures in the history of Christianity. No joke.

Yet each generation has troubles of its own. In New Testament times,

¹³Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed according to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 172, 176. "Reverence and fear are at the heart of Christian worship." D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 119–120.

¹⁴Some of this section is taken from Douglas Sean O'Donnell's sermon "Sandals Off, Mouths Shut," chapter 9 in *Ecclesiastes: Enjoyment East of Eden*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), 107–119; used with permission.

James criticized those in the church who were showing favoritism toward the rich (James 2:2–4), and Paul decried those in the Corinthian church who were getting drunk on the Communion wine (1 Cor. 11:21). Jesus got out a whip for those making a profit on the pilgrims to Jerusalem, treating the temple like a den of thieves (John 2:13–17). In Old Testament times, the prophets called out the hypocrites who walked through the sacrificial motions (e.g., Isa. 29:13; Mal. 1:14). And in Ecclesiastes 5:1–7, Pastor Solomon (Qoheleth) prophetically shares some choice words of his own for the recreationally religious person who is oblivious that his “worship” is highly offensive to God. Put simply, he warns the “fool” (vv. 1, 3, 4) to fear God (v. 7). Put differently and more broadly, he instructs all of God’s people at all times on how to worship wisely.

Establishing a Safe Distance

As we approach God in worship, Pastor Solomon wants to establish a safe distance between us and the transcendent God. He does this with two imperatives given at the top (v. 1) and tail (v. 7) of the text. At the top, we are charged to watch out when we go to worship (“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God”), and at the tail, we are given the central charge of wisdom literature: to fear God. This *inclusio* of admonitions counsels “caution, reverence, restraint, moderation, and sincerity” before the Lord.¹⁵

In Ecclesiastes 1–4, we learn a number of things about God, including that whatever God does endures forever (3:14), that God has given us work to be busy with (3:10), that God grants us enjoyment in our work (2:24–25; 3:13) and the reward of wisdom, knowledge, and joy (2:26), that God has made everything beautiful in its time (3:11), and that in his time he will judge the righteous and the wicked (3:17).

In Ecclesiastes 5:1–7, we learn three truths about God. First, God has a house. In verse 1, “the house of God” references Solomon’s temple, built in the tenth century BC and destroyed in 587 BC. While it stood, the temple was a visible testimony to God’s absolute holiness. There Isaiah saw “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up” (Isa. 6:1) as the seraphim called to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (v. 3). The temple symbolized God’s holiness—that is, he was inaccessible except by sacrifice through a priestly mediator, and even such a priestly mediator could be incinerated by God’s consuming fire (Lev. 10:1–2; cf. 15:31; 1 Sam. 6:19–20). Of course, God was not limited to this human-made house. In Solomon’s

¹⁵Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 197.

dedication of the temple, he says as much: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). Solomon echoes that prayer in Ecclesiastes 5:2, proclaiming that “God is in heaven.” Is God in the temple *and* in heaven? Yes, he is: “the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isa. 6:3; cf. Deut. 4:39). Wherever God is, there is a distance and difference between the Creator and his creation. He is not our peer: “I am God and not a man, the Holy One” (Hos. 11:9).

Second, God knows and judges the way we worship. He sees into our hearts—the attitudes behind the actions—and judges whether our worship is “acceptable worship” (Heb. 12:28) or not. If it is not, he renders his judgment against “the [mere] appearance of godliness” (2 Tim. 3:5). He gets “angry” at the blabbering fool and “destroys” (i.e., does not accept) his sacrificed animal and retracted vow (Eccl. 5:5–6).

Third, unlike the gods of the Gentiles, which are deaf and dumb, Israel’s God hears and speaks. In the temple, God’s people were told “to draw near to listen” (Eccl. 5:1), and in the temple, God heard and accepted sincere sacrificial vows.

So, then, in light of God’s transcendence, omnipresence, omniscience, and holiness (God has a house); justice (God knows and judges our worship); and forgiveness and accessibility (God hears and speaks), “God is the one you must fear” (Eccl. 5:7). Our perpetual posture before the Lord should be that of humility, awe, reverence, and faith. We are to come with boldness and confidence before our good, approachable King (mixed, of course, with a bit of shaking in our boots). As Annie Dillard fittingly describes:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? . . . It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.¹⁶

Drawing Near Wisely

This God “in heaven” (Eccl. 5:2), who rules time (3:1–15) and judges all peoples (3:16–22), nevertheless can be approached. The Preacher emphasizes

¹⁶Annie Dillard, quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 114.

this approachability by changing in chapter 5 from his “reflective ‘journaling’ style” to sermonizing.¹⁷ That is, he moves from first-person observations (e.g., “I saw” and “I considered”) to second-person imperatives (e.g., “[You] pay what you vow” and “You must fear”). This is the first time in the book that the reader is addressed and admonished.

Having looked at *God*, let us turn our attention to *you*. Between the two imperatives that frame our text, we find a number of negative admonitions: “Be *not* rash with your mouth” (5:2), “do *not* delay paying it” (v. 4), and “let *not* your mouth lead you into sin” (v. 6). All the admonitions are warnings about words in worship, about nouns and verbs related to verbal communication: “Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word” (5:2); “a fool’s voice . . . many words” (v. 3); “not vow . . . and not pay” (v. 5); “let not your mouth . . . do not say . . . your voice” (v. 6); and “words grow many” (v 7).

Listening First

Drawing near to God requires that we listen before we speak:

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words. (Eccl. 5:1–3)

Temple sacrifices were offered in silence. In effect, the silence shouted out the steadfast love of a holy, holy, holy God for undeserving sinners. Then the silence was broken by a reading from the Law of Moses and an explanation for the people. The response to hearing from God was to speak to God—through prayers, songs, and sometimes personal vows. The service closed with a benediction.

The emphasis in Ecclesiastes 5:1–3 is on listening to the Word of God. This listening ear is contrasted with the mouths of fools. Here the foolish worshipers are not necessarily those who bring blind, lame, or sick animals to be sacrificed (“they do not know that they are doing evil,” v. 1); rather, the foolish are those who sin with their mouths. Instead of being like Moses before the burning bush—with their sandals off, mouths shut, and ears open,

¹⁷Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 167.

respectfully revering the Lord, Ex. 3:5)—they chatter on before their Creator. They mumble mantras before the Almighty! With hollow hearts and blank minds, they offer up “empty phrases” (Matt. 6:7), thinking that the more they talk, the more God will listen.

In the temple, Israel was to listen first. As Christians, we know and appreciate that through Jesus’s death, our Lord judged the temple (Matt. 21:13; 23:38) and replaced it (Matt. 12:6; 24:2; 26:61; 27:40, 51). We do not journey to Jerusalem to worship God in some building. Under the new covenant in Jesus’s blood, we have a perfect and permanent sacrifice and an intercessor for our sins (Heb. 7:23–28), as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within everyone who worships God in spirit and in truth (John 4:23–24; Eph. 2:13–22). Jesus is the temple we go through to worship God rightly, and in him we become the temple of the living God (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:5). Nevertheless, like Israel of old, we are to hear (“Hear, O Israel,” Deut. 6:4) before we speak to God. In all walks of life, but especially in public worship, we are to “be quick to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19). The words of God, rather than the words of the worshiper, are to take priority. Wise worship starts with locked lips.

Speaking Second

Those lips should not stay locked, however. Worshiping wisely also involves right words at the right time. We are to listen to God first and speak to God second. The second half of this Old Testament text covers the boundaries for this second lesson:

When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear. (Eccl. 5:4–7)

If it is not obvious from the repetition of the word *vow* (five times), this section centers on temple vows. Such a vow involved a conditional promise; a worshiper coming to the temple asked God for something in return for something—usually money or an animal sacrifice (Lev. 27:1–25), although it could be just about anything or anyone. For example, barren Hannah vowed to

give God her son if she was able to conceive and give birth (1 Samuel 1–2).¹⁸ So the problem being addressed in Ecclesiastes is not the vow itself (it was a condoned but not commanded biblical practice), but the temptation to “delay” (Eccl. 5:4) or “not pay” (v. 5) the vow once the request has been granted. To say to the temple “messenger” (the spiritual bill collector sent to retrieve the coins for the temple treasury) that “It was a mistake” or “It was unintentional” is intentionally sinful (Num. 15:30–31; Deut. 23:21). It is better not to vow than to vow and refrain from keeping your end of the deal. “All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matt. 5:37 NIV), as Jesus said. Why? Because God doesn’t take kindly to vows like that of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). Or, as Solomon exhorted, God “has no pleasure in fools” (Eccl. 5:4) and “Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?” (v. 6). All toying with God will be exposed (“You blind fools!” Matt. 23:16–22) and judged (“a rod for his back,” Prov. 14:3). All lame excuses will be leveled by the Lord.

We all make vows to God and to one another. I vowed to remain faithful to my wife “’til death do us part.” As an ordained minister, I vowed “to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the Gospel and the purity, peace and unity of the church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise.” If you are a witness in a court of law, you vow (perhaps even with your hand on a Bible) to “tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” so help you before God. Making vows is not the issue. Making impulsive promises that you have no intention of keeping or without any real idea of what you are saying is foolish (cf. Prov. 20:25). It is a dream-induced fantasy.

Twice Solomon compares “many words” (Eccl. 5:3, 7) to dreams. The sense of verse 3 is that just as an extremely busy day produces sound sleep (and the dreams that come with such sleep), so a fool produces verbosity. And the sense of verse 7 is that pious phrases uttered by “the mouth . . . [that] pours out evil things” (Prov. 15:28)—reciting God’s covenant statutes (Ps. 50:16)—will prove to be as futile as the fantasies created in slumberland. Poof! They are gone the moment you awake. We should watch out for making dreamlike oaths. If we are to vow, let us “make [our] vows to the LORD [our] God and perform them” (Ps. 76:11). Let us not say to the Lord, “I will do this” and then fail to do it (cf. the parable of the two sons, Matt. 21:28–30). There is no value in mindless muttering and great danger in rash

¹⁸ Other examples of vows are Jacob’s vowing that if God protected and provided for him, he would give God “a full tenth” (Gen. 28:20–22), and David’s vowing that he wouldn’t go to bed until the temple was built (see the poetic exaggeration in Ps. 132:2–5).

vows (e.g., the story of Jephthah’s daughter, Judg. 11:29–40). Perhaps the only vow we should make—certainly the safest, but never the easiest—is the vow to fear God. Pledge to do that today! “Lord, I will listen to you when you speak; and, Lord, when I speak to you I will not come before you with aimless chatter or deluded daydreaming, but with humble and honest admiration and heartfelt and reasonable requests.”¹⁹

Not Fearing God

Beyond our speak-first, listen-second (if ever) world, the more foundational issue is the absence of the fear of God in the culture as well as in the church. Paul’s quotation of Psalm 36:1, “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:18), could be the contemporary church’s motto. If it is not found in our actual vision statements, it is found in many worship services every Sunday. We have made glorious Jesus into our own inglorious image and serve him up to accommodate everyone’s personal tastes.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 is an antidote for such cultural and religious rubbish. It especially protests against this new Protestantism. It gives us a sorely needed vision of God and a picture of wise worship. It moves us beyond God as “the Big Guy upstairs” and Jesus as our “homeboy.” Instead, it takes us to the feet of “the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy” (Isa. 57:15) and of his Son, Jesus Christ, “the firstborn of the dead, . . . the ruler of kings on earth” (Rev. 1:5), the One whose eyes are a flame of fire, whose voice is like the roar of many waters, and whose face is like the sun shining in full strength (vv. 14–16), the One who nevertheless “loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (v. 5). Such a view of God compels us to take our sandals off, keep our mouths shut, and listen first.

SCRIPTURE-SATURATED

Writing in the same century as Nehemiah lived, the Greek historian Thucydides penned a popular saying: “It is the people, not the walls, that make a city.”²⁰ We might build upon that concept, summarizing the book of Nehemiah in this way: as God’s people rebuild the wall, God is rebuilding his covenant community under the authority of his Word. This theme is especially seen in chapter 8, which highlights how *God’s people love, learn, and live his law*.

Nehemiah 8 features three main characters: Ezra (scribe, priest, and

¹⁹The phrase “aimless chatter or deluded daydreaming” comes from Carl Schultz, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 441.

²⁰See Raymond Brown, *Nehemiah*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 127.

Scripture reader), the Levites (Scripture teachers, or we could call them Bible translators and/or exegetes), and “all the people.” It is the laity, however, more than the leaders, that dominate this text. Note that “the people” is repeated eighteen times and “all the people” eleven times.²¹ The God-centered worship service at the Water Gate is also, if you will, people-centered. It is people-centered in the sense that we learn here that it was a gathering of men, women, and children (“all who could understand,” v. 2) who wanted to hear and heed the Word.

They Loved the Law

Having looked at the phrase “the people,” we will next divide our summary phrase—*God’s people love, learn, and live his law*—into three sections. First, God’s people love his law. Verse 1 and the beginning of verse 4 show this point.

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. (v. 1)

And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they [the people] had made for the purpose. (v. 4a)

This was a megachurch. There were thousands in attendance. But this was no modern-day megachurch service. No one was sitting in the balcony, settling into his comfortable seat with a freshly brewed cappuccino in hand as he waited for the soft jazz/soft sermon entertainment to begin. No! Rather, here we find God’s people gathering, building, speaking, listening, standing, and bowing. “Give me the Word!” was their sentiment.

Besides the gathering, building, speaking, listening, standing, and bowing, another action that demonstrates their affection toward the Word was their double “Amen” at the end of the Scripture reading.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. (vv. 5–6a)

To say “Amen” is to express agreement. It means: “We believe it,” “We agree,” “It is true,” or “So let it be!” The church father Jerome “commented

²¹Note also “the assembly” and the pronouns *they* and *them*.

that in the early church, when visitors used to come, they were commonly frightened at the *amen*.” They said, “It had the sound of thunder.”²² Does your church say “Amen” after the Bible is read? How about a double “Amen”? How about raising your hands (as they did) and giving the double “Amen” so loud it wakes the babies in the nursery!

Because of the abuses that go with it, we underestimate the value of certain words and certain postures as real expressions of love. The typical story of an engagement proposal ends with the man upon his knees, confessing his love. It would seem odd to us if the proposal ended otherwise. Just imagine if a bride-to-be said her proposal happened this way: “He knocked on the door, turned his back to me, stared into the sky, and muttered under his breath, ‘Um, will you marry me?’” Such a proposal would be preposterous. There can be a deadness in many churches that are full of rote confessions and robotic postures, but that does not mean that such confessions and postures can’t be faithful and appropriate representations of the congregation’s earnest love for God and his Word. In fact, the best worship is when both heart and hands are raised in devotion—when, for example, we stand to hear the Word read, we stand also in our hearts, lifting up our love to the Lord for his divine revelation. “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97).

They Learned the Law

Beyond loving the law, God’s people also learned it. Without a doubt—from top to tail—Nehemiah 8 depicts a worship service centered on the written Word of God:

Top: “And all the people gathered as one man. . . . And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law.” (v. 1)

Tail: “And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God.” (v. 18)

The law is mentioned nine times in this chapter! This emphasis is interesting in light of the fact that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah concentrate on the *temple*. Of course, what we have in Nehemiah 8 is not a new dedication of the temple, such as was done in Solomon’s time. Rather, it is a reverent and royal reception of divine revelation. As Derek Kidner writes: “At the dedication of Solomon’s Temple there had been glory and beauty, natural and

²²This story is retold in Douglas Wilson, *Mother Kirk: Essays and Forays in Practical Ecclesiology* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2001), 152.

supernatural, to overwhelm the worshippers. Here the focus, apart from a wooden platform, was a scroll—or more exactly, what was written in it.”²³

The Protestant Reformation introduced an important architectural shift—giving the pulpit, not the altar, the place of prominence. For projecting sound and the idea of authority, the Protestants built tall and large pulpits, and often in front of the church platform they placed a large, opened Bible translated into the language of the people. There was also a Communion table, but it was set to the side or behind the pulpit. It is this kind of deliberate positioning that we see in our text. “The book of the Torah,” as William Dumbrell explains, “is literally placed at the center of the united people.”²⁴ It was the Torah, not the temple, that then, as it does now, served as “the foundation” for covenant community life.²⁵

In graduate school, I took a class on the history of revivals. We began with the “revivals” recorded in Scripture and then walked through the important revivals in Christian history. Our professor argued that there were three characteristics to all true works of Spirit-empowered revival: (1) emotions were shown, (2) order was established, and (3) the emphasis on the Word of God as the center of worship was restored. Nehemiah 8 certainly fits under this rubric.

Notice the emotions expressed. In verses 9–12, people express a mixture of sorrow and joy. At first, when they heard the Word, they grieved over their sins. With each commandment read, it must have felt like blows from a hammer as the perfect Word pounded them with its purity. “Yet, despite the seriousness of their sin, the people were urged to dry their tears,” because it was the Feast of Booths, and within ten days of the Feast of Booths would be the Day of Atonement, that day of mercy when all their sins “would be fully, immediately and irrevocably pardoned.”²⁶ So, as is true of any true work of the Spirit, there was the right mixture of emotions—sorrow over sin and joy over salvation.

Furthermore, as is true in any true work of the Spirit, we see the establishment of order. This characteristic may surprise readers who presume that the Holy Spirit is synonymous with spontaneity. There can indeed be spontaneity in worship, but it should all end in order. Recall how Paul concluded his section on spiritual gifts (or the abuse of them) in 1 Corinthians 12–14: “But all

²³Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 105–106.

²⁴William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 320.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Brown, *Nehemiah*, 134.

things should be done decently and in order” (14:40). The apostle tells the super-spiritual Christians in Corinth that the Spirit desires the church service to have both decency and order.

For some Christians, especially in the free-church tradition, the word *liturgy* has a negative connotation. To them, that word fits churches that don’t preach the Bible. But the word *liturgy* comes from the Greek word *latreuo* (meaning “to work or serve”), which is found in several places in the New Testament. So *liturgy* is a Bible word, and a good (not bad) one, and “one’s work in worship” is not condemnable but commendable: “There must be some holy sweat if you are to please and glorify God.”²⁷ Some think we can divide churches into two categories—liturgical and non-liturgical. However, in reality, every church is liturgical because all churches have an order of service. Even the most charismatic churches, which claim they just let the Spirit have his way, usually follow the same order of service every Sunday. As Hughes says elsewhere:

All churches have liturgies, even those which would call themselves “non-liturgical.” In fact, having no liturgy is a liturgy! Relaxed charismatic services may be as liturgical in their format as a high-church service—and in some cases more rigid.²⁸

So the question is not whether such and such a church has a liturgy (order of service). Of course it does. All churches are liturgical in that sense. Rather, the question is this: Is its liturgy biblical or unbiblical? Is its worship governed by the Word or by something or someone else—perhaps the whims of culture or personal preference? Nehemiah 8 gives us a biblical picture of a God-honoring liturgy: a call to worship, a formal reading of Scripture, an oral exposition or explanation of Scripture, and a celebration of a sacred meal. Does this seem familiar? Yes! For nearly 2,500 years, God’s people have followed that basic liturgy. God is not a God of disorder. Just as he sent his Spirit at the beginning of time to bring order to creation, so he still sends his Spirit in these last days to bring order to his new creation—the church.

In Nehemiah 8, we see a true work of the Spirit. It has all the marks: emotions are shown, order is established, and the emphasis on the Word of God as the center of worship is restored.

Speaking of the Word, don’t be afraid to be a bookish church, if your bookishness is Bible-bookishness. We are a people of the Book *because* God

²⁷Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, 115.

²⁸Ibid.

wrote a book. He didn't produce a movie. He didn't record a music video. He wrote a book! And the people in Nehemiah's day loved that book! And because they loved the Word of God, they learned it. Is there any *learning* in your church's liturgy? Does your service begin with "all who could understand" assembling to hear the Word (vv. 1–2) and "study" it (v. 13), and end with people understanding "the words that were declared to them" (v. 12b)? Hosea 4:6 reads, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." Some of that destruction, it is our strong contention, is in our churches today because we have tossed out the bookishness of Christianity. It used to be said that God's people were "a people of the Book." Sadly, I don't think that would be an accurate assessment today. Perhaps "People of the YouTube Clip" or "People of the Three-Minute Skit" would be a more accurate assessment. Don't be ashamed to be a bookish church. Hold high the Book! Seek to teach men, women, and children the content of the Bible. Engrave Nehemiah 8:8 above the church doors, upon the preacher's pulpit, and within the pew Bibles: "They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."

They Lived the Law

Nehemiah 8 shows us that because God's people loved the law, they learned it, and they also *lived* it. Authentic worship effects our ethics! Notice how nicely what is said in verses 13–15 (learning) transitions into verse 16 and what follows (living). I highlight below this transition from learning the law to living the law:

And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written." *So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves*, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. (vv. 14–16)

Verse 18 also highlights the transition from learning ("And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God") to living ("They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule"). From early morning until midday, all of them listened to the Bible being read to them—"the ears of all the

people were attentive” (v. 3). As we think on the wandering, grumbling, rebellious people of the Old Testament, this is indeed “rare responsiveness.”²⁹ What (or who) has gotten into them?

The Holy Spirit is the answer! We say this because the Spirit, while not mentioned in chapter 8, is mentioned in chapter 9. The prayer recorded there mentions the secret work of the Spirit in the life of Israel: “You gave your good Spirit to instruct them” (v. 20). Moreover, verse 30 states, “Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets.” Like Joel 2 (cf. Acts 2), Nehemiah 8 is a down payment of the new covenant. But even a down payment is a real payment. Put differently, this is not the full, final work of the Spirit in the church, but it is a real work.

What does all this mean for those who live in and under the new covenant? It means that we are to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). We who love and have learned the Word ought to live the Word. We ought to live out, by the power of the Spirit, *all* that is written in the Bible for us.

Nehemiah 8 shows us a high moment in Israel’s history, when God’s people loved the law, learned the law, and lived out the law. Moreover, it teaches the church today—we who have Christ’s indwelling Spirit—that we ought to (by the power of the Spirit) love/desire the Word, study/know the Word, and walk/live according to the Word. When so many churches don’t know why they do what they do or don’t do what they know they should do, we write this book with the desire to ground you in God’s revelation about worship and about keeping the Bible at the center of our services on Sunday and throughout the week.

ORDERING WORSHIP

In answering which scriptural characteristics help control Christian corporate worship, we have seen that our worship should be, among other things, God-fearing (Ecclesiastes 5) and bibliocentric (Nehemiah 8). In other words, our worship should be God-revering and Scripture-saturated. Next, let’s build upon that foundation by answering the more practical question: How, then, should we order our weekly Sunday gathering?

Our worship should be regulated *tota et sola Scriptura* (“by the Scriptures alone, and by all of Scripture”).³⁰ True. But what does the Bible pre-

²⁹Kidner, *Nehemiah*, 104.

³⁰“Was David right to eat the showbread? . . . Was Christ right to worship in the synagogue, a pattern of worship generally required by God (Lev. 23:3; Ps. 74:8), but nowhere regulated in the details? To ask such questions is to answer them. Put another way, the requirements of the Word of God are broader than the

scribe regarding Christian *liturgy*.³¹ Nothing. There is no command in the New Testament to (1) gather on Sunday, (2) say the *Shema*, immediately followed by the *Gloria Patri*, (3) read Genesis, Jeremiah, Matthew, and then Paul, (4) share some matzah bread, and (5) go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Rather, what we find throughout the New Testament are descriptive elements of worship. Does this allow for freedom of forms? Yes. Does it mean we ignore what is described? God forbid! “When something is not specifically commanded, prescribed, or directed or when there is no scriptural example to guide us in how we are to perform some particular aspect of worship we should try nevertheless to be guided by scriptural principles.”³²

JESUS’S WORSHIP HABITS

With that truth in mind, let’s start with Jesus’s worship habits. In Luke 4:16–21, we read:

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

Notice six details.

First, it was Jesus’s “custom” to attend synagogue on Saturdays. To give a conservative estimate, if Jesus had attended synagogue on the Sabbath since age thirteen, then at this point in his ministry he had worshiped

requirements *in* the Word of God. Our worship is to be authoritatively regulated *tota et sola Scriptura*, by the Scriptures alone, and by all of Scripture.” Wilson, *Mother Kirk*, 125.

³¹ Again, the word *liturgy* is a Greek (also Latin) word that simply means “the work or service of the people.” It need not have a high-church connotation.

³² Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), 171.

there about nine hundred times. Whatever else we might say about that fact, we must acknowledge that Jesus didn't find the "formal" liturgy (see what follows below) and regular attendance in a building designated for learning about God to be stultifying to his spiritual development (Luke 2:40).

Second, there was a Bible reading, and Jesus was the one who read it. Did he ask to do the reading or was he asked to do it? We don't know. Was it in Hebrew or Greek? We don't know. Diaspora synagogues would have read the Bible in Greek; for the Jews of Palestine, the reading would have been in Hebrew and translated into Aramaic. Perhaps the synagogue in Jesus's hometown read the Hebrew. Through the synagogue school, and perhaps through Joseph's business, Jesus would have learned Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic.

Third, there was an "attendant" who handed him the scroll of Isaiah. Was Jesus given Isaiah because (1) it was the only scroll they had, (2) there was a set reading from Isaiah for the day and he knew where to find it, or (3) he asked for it and, as the teacher, had the liberty to preach from any text he desired? We cannot be certain, but most likely he simply was given the next section in the prophet Isaiah, following the previous Sabbath's reading.

Fourth, on this occasion, he preached Christ (himself) from the Old Testament (and it didn't go over well in his hometown).

Fifth, when he read the text, he was standing, yet when he taught, he was sitting. Sitting was a sign of authority. He spoke *ex cathedra* ("from the chair").

Sixth, this passage, along with a few passing references elsewhere in the Gospels and Acts,³³ gives us all we are told about the synagogue service in the New Testament. Why? Is it because the synagogue service was insignificant to Jesus's view of public worship? No. Was it then because the majority of the first readers of the New Testament knew very well all the elements of service? Yes.

I have read many explanations of the synagogue service over the years. Perhaps the clearest and simplest, and thus certainly one of the best, comes from a children's book that covers the topic. The full picture is in order:

The synagogue was a place of meeting for reading . . . the Bible, and for prayer. . . . Within the synagogue there was nearly always a closet

³³For example, Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:21–28; 3:1–6; 6:2; Luke 6:6; 13:10; John 6:59; 18:20; Acts 13:5; 14:1; 18:4, 19.

or chest which stood against the wall that faced toward Jerusalem. This closet or chest was the ark where the scrolls of the sacred books were kept. These were the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. . . . In the center of the synagogue stood a platform on which a reading desk was placed. At the foot of the platform and facing the rest of the room were benches called chief seats. Here important persons sat during the services. . . . The leader of the synagogue conducted the service.³⁴ The Shema was said.³⁵ Benedictions were recited.³⁶ A procession of men and of boys over thirteen years of age brought the scrolls from the ark and placed them on the reading desk. Psalms were chanted. Then the leader chose someone to read from the Law. He began where the reading of the last Sabbath had ended. Then a portion from the Prophets was read. A member of the congregation was chosen to explain the Law or to preach a verse from the Prophets.³⁷ There were prayers. The service closed with a final benediction.³⁸

There is little doubt that when the early church gathered regularly on Sundays (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2) or what came to be called “the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10)—because it was the day Jesus rose from the dead (see Mark 16:1–2; John 20:1)³⁹ and bestowed the Spirit upon his church (Acts 2:1–3)—the pattern of the synagogue played a major role in the structure of their gatherings. Perhaps they simplified the structure, or perhaps what is recorded in the New Testament is only part of their gatherings. The picture we get from the gatherings mentioned in Acts 2:42–47 and 20:7–11 centers on table fellowship (“the breaking of bread”), apostolic teaching (Christians

³⁴To this detail, Ralph P. Martin adds: “The ‘ruler’ summons the ‘minister’ (see Luke vi, 20) to invite someone from the congregation to commence the service with this ‘call to worship’. He begins with the cry: ‘Bless ye the Lord, the One who is to be blessed’; and the people respond with the benediction: ‘Blessed be the Lord . . . for ever;’ in the spirit of Nehemiah ix, 5. At the outset, then, the worshippers are invited to think of God and to acknowledge His greatness and blessing.” *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 25.

³⁵Compare Deuteronomy 6:4–9 with 11:13–21 and Numbers 15:37–41.

³⁶While there was no standardized prayer book, the *Eighteen Benedictions* show something of what the Jews of Jesus’s generation would have prayed. These prayers “cover a wide range of themes . . . partly an expression of praise, partly petitions for spiritual and material benefits and partly supplications for those in need (exiles, judges and counsellors and chosen people).” Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 26.

³⁷Cf. Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2:175; Philo, *De Somniis* 2:127.

³⁸Ethel L. Smither, illus. Ruth King, *A Picture Book of Palestine* (New York/Nashville: Abingdon, 1947), 46, 50–51. For more scholarly summaries, see Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 23–27; Andrew E. Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise! Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 228–233; and Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 31–34.

³⁹On the Lord’s Day, cf. *Didache* 14.1; Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 9.1; Justin, *Apology* I.67.3 (Justin speaks of the focus on Scripture reading [the writings of the Prophets and apostles “are read as long as we have time”], exhortation, and prayer). “Each Lord’s Day was an Easter Festival, since this was not yet confined to one single Sunday in the year. . . . It is correct to say that from the time of Christ’s resurrection, the day of rest appointed by God was transferred to the day of Christ’s resurrection and was regarded as ‘fulfilled’ in it.” Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (repr., Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall, n.d.), 11.

“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching”),⁴⁰ and prayer (“*the prayers*,” to be precise, likely a reference to set prayers said in Jewish homes, at synagogue, and perhaps when traveling to the temple, no doubt Christianized where needed).

Again, while this pattern is not prescriptive, it would be foolish for us to dismiss a scriptural pattern as unimportant. We can’t be dogmatic (we must order our services like this or else!)⁴¹ and we shouldn’t be stale (for example, insisting that Christian worship must always contain teaching, Communion, and prayer in that order and never with variance), but we can be wise. And to be wise is to understand patterns and principles we find in Scripture *and*, in general, followed throughout church history. As Old writes: “While the Reformers understood the Scriptures to be their sole authority, they were very interested in how generations of Christians down through history had understood the Scriptures. In the history of Christian worship they found many good examples of how the church had truly understood Scripture.”⁴² Later he comments that the contemporary church should “maintain [the Reformed liturgical] tradition because it witnesses to the authority of Scripture.”⁴³ Its public worship practices are “above all, according to Scripture.”⁴⁴

WORSHIP THROUGH THE AGES

In this same vein, in his excellent essay “Worship Through the Ages,” Nick Needham writes, “Unless we wish to make a virtue of solipsism, any serious consideration of worship must take into account the history of worship, as a sort of running commentary on Scripture, a commentary embodied in practice and preserved in literary monuments, especially liturgies.”⁴⁵ Table 1 (page 49) is my summary of Needham’s historical survey.⁴⁶

⁴⁰In 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul focused on the Word elements of worship, writing, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”

⁴¹“Jesus attended the synagogue regularly and taught there (Luke 4:15–16), so there can be no question as to God’s approval of the institution. It is interesting, however, to note that the synagogue and the temple were very different in their scriptural warrant: God regulated the sacrificial worship of the tabernacle and the temple in detail, charging the people to do everything strictly according to the revealed pattern. He hardly said anything to Israel, however, about the synagogue (or, for that matter, about the ministries of teaching and prayer carried out on the temple grounds), leaving the arranging of its services largely to the discretion of the people. Of course, they knew in general what God wanted: he wanted his word to be taught and prayer to be offered. But God left the specifics open-ended.” John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principle and Practice of Biblical Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996), 23.

⁴²Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture*, 4.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁵Nick R. Needham, “Worship Through the Ages,” in *Give Praise to God*, 375.

⁴⁶Cf. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). See his helpful charts—from Rome to Rayburn!—on historic liturgical structures (see Charts 1.1 to 6.2).

Table 1. The Basic Liturgies of the Western Church

APOSTOLIC FATHERS	THE PATRISTIC AGE	THE MIDDLE AGES	MARTIN LUTHER	ULRICH ZWINGLI*	JOHN CALVIN	ENGLISH PURITANS
Scripture readings: OT and NT	Greeting/response	Greeting/response	Hymn or psalm	Set prayer	Scripture reading: Psalm 124:8	Call to worship
The sermon	Scripture reading: OT	<i>Kyrie eleison</i> : "Lord, have mercy"	<i>Kyrie eleison</i> : "Lord, have mercy"	Scripture reading: NT Epistles	Opening set prayer: Confession of sin	Prayer of adoration and supplication
The collection	Psalm or hymn	Hymn: <i>Benedictus dominus</i> (Luke 1:68–79) or <i>Gloria in excelsis</i>	Set prayer	<i>Gloria in excelsis</i> (said, not sung)	Scriptural words of pardon/absolution	Psalm
The Lord's Supper	Scripture reading: NT (Acts—Rev.)	Collect (set prayer for the day)	Scripture reading: NT (Acts—Revelation)	The Apostles' Creed	Ten Commandments with <i>Kyrie eleison</i> : sung	Scripture reading: OT
	Psalm or hymn	Scripture reading: OT	Hymn: Sung by choir	Prayer: The Lord's Prayer	Prayer for illumination	Psalm
	Scripture reading: Gospels	Scripture reading: NT Epistles	Scripture reading: Gospels (chanted)	Set prayer	Scripture reading	Scripture reading: NT
	Sermon	Hymn	The Apostles' Creed	The Lord's Supper	Sermon	Prayer of confession and intercession
	Prayers	Scripture reading: Gospels	Sermon	Psalm (said, not sung)	Collection (offering)	Sermon
	Lord's Supper	Chants: Trisagion	Prayer: The Lord's Prayer	Set prayer	Set prayer of intercession, then Lord's Prayer	Prayer of thanks and intercession
	Benediction	Sermon	The Lord's Supper	Benediction	The Apostles' Creed or a psalm sung	The Lord's Prayer
		Litany (responsive liturgical prayers)	Set prayer		The Lord's Supper (once a month)	The Lord's Supper
		Offertory/psalm sung	Benediction: (Num. 6:24–26)		Benediction: (Num. 6:24–26)	Psalm
		Kiss of peace				Benediction
		Lord's Supper				
		Prayer: The Lord's Prayer				
		Dismissal				

* This is the order for Zwingli's communion service. "The normal Sunday morning worship in Zwinglian Zurich was essentially a preaching service, consisting of Bible readings, prayers, and a sermon. Zwingli was unique among the Reformers in not regarding the Lord's Supper as integral to Sunday worship; he was happy that it should be celebrated four times a year: Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and a local Zurich festival on September 11." Nick R. Needham, "Worship Through the Ages," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 399.

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PASTORAL RESOURCES

