LEGACY CHURCH

Ordered: God's Design for Church Life

Order in Worship

From the Garden to the Gathering

JOHN 4:23–24

Where We Are

Today we open a new series, Ordered: God's Design for Church Life, and the premise is simple. The New Testament falls into four movements. The Gospels give us the testimony of Jesus, Acts gives us the testimony of the church, the Epistles supply the theological backbone of the faith along with its instruction to the church, and Revelation tells us how the story ends. The Epistles are where we go for instruction, because they were written by the disciples of Jesus to that very end.

Inside the Epistles there are two broad categories of instruction we may never have noticed. There is Christian Life, and there is Church Order. Christian Life instruction carries into every corner of our days, the way Paul tells the Thessalonians to make it their ambition to live quietly, work with their hands, and mind their own business (1 Thessalonians 4:11). Church Order instruction governs what happens when the saints gather, the way Paul writes that all things should be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40), because God is not a God of confusion but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:33). The trouble is that we tend to blend the two together, and the blending leads to inconsistent application.

Most Sunday sermons live in the Christian Life lane. You rarely hear a sermon on what we are to do when we gather. But God speaks to it, so we will speak to it. This series is us admitting that God has an order and a design for the gathering of the saints, and that much of what we assume about church we simply inherited from the rooms we were discipled in, and never thought to question. This is a series where we will question. God loves the church as a people and as a gathered people, and He has a particular way He wants things done when we come together. Our job is to trust Him, to trust His ways, and to set His preferences above our own.

Today the subject is Order in Worship. When we think of worship, we usually think of the portion of a service given to singing, and everyone carries a thousand different ideas about how it should look. Do we sing to God? About God? Are we creating an environment, shifting the atmosphere, calling down His presence, waging some kind of spiritual warfare? We are going to answer those questions, but I want to do it responsibly. So before we get practical, we will build a theology of worship from the whole of Scripture, and only then walk it into our gathering.

Worship Through the Whole of Scripture

ACT ONE

Pre-Fall

Worship begins in the garden. God makes Adam and Eve and sets them in His presence, and there we find them working, fellowshipping with Him and with one another, obeying and serving Him, and guarding the garden as a holy place, keeping what was evil outside from coming in (Genesis 2:15). This is how man was made to live: perfect fellowship with God and with each other, hearts full of love and trust, unveiled and uninterrupted communion with their Maker. In the garden, everything they did was worship.

It is striking that the first song in the Bible is sung here, before the fall, and it is not sung to God. It is Adam's song to Eve, a love song to his bride (Genesis 2:23). There is no record of Adam and Eve singing to God, which does not mean it never happened, only that Moses did not find it important to mention. Before sin there were no priests, no sacrifices, no altars, no holy days, no holy places, because everyone was a priest, every heart was an altar, every day was holy, and every place was holy, for God was everywhere always. Worship was happening constantly, because worship was not ritual. It was relationship. It was life lived with God, for the glory of God. Adam's work was worship, naming the animals was worship, cultivating the garden was worship, walking with God was worship, marriage was worship, exercising dominion over the earth was worship (Genesis 1:28), and creation itself was worship (Psalm 19:1). Everything was lived before the face of God. And then everything changed.

ACT TWO

The Fall

They stop worshipping God and turn to worship themselves, which is what we always do when we choose our way over His. They do the one thing God warned them not to do, and sin enters them and corrupts both creation and worship (Genesis 3:6; Romans 1:25). They are expelled from the garden, no longer in the presence of God (Genesis 3:24). And when man is severed from the presence of God, worship begins to shift. When the relationship is broken, worship turns to ritual.

The very next scene proves it. In Genesis 4, Cain and Abel bring their offerings, and now worship is tangled with ritual and sin (Genesis 4:3–5; Hebrews 11:4). They go to a place, and they bring a sacrifice. Here, for the first time, we meet the idea that you draw near to God by going somewhere and giving something. Where communion once happened everywhere and always, now it happens at the place of worship. They could still be near Him, could still speak with Him, so long as they came to Him and brought their offering.

ACT THREE

The Law

Time passes, and the Old Covenant is given through Moses. What we see is God's desire to be with His people. He tells them, in effect, that He loves them and wants His presence to dwell among them, and He wants a people who will worship Him. But because the relationship is marred by sin, that nearness must now come through ritual.

> EXODUS 25:8
>
> *And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.*
>
> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

So God institutes the tabernacle of Moses, the first temple-like structure in Israel's history, designed like a miniature Eden. Only now there are veils, sacrifices, offerings, designated priests, incense, altars, washings, and boundaries. The presence is near, but access is limited. The worshipper never forgets: I cannot simply walk in (Hebrews 9:8). It is worth noticing that there were no songs tied to the worship of God in the temple itself, though Israel sang to God throughout daily life, usually songs of thanks and testimony more than theology.

ACT FOUR

King David

Then comes David, who was not satisfied with the tabernacle of Moses. The previous generation had lost the ark of the covenant, where the presence of God rested, so by the time David took the throne the tabernacle of Moses was operating without the presence of God. Ritual with no relationship. David goes and brings the ark home (2 Samuel 6). Rather than return it to where it technically belonged, behind the veil, he sets it in the middle of the city inside a great tent for everyone to see, and around it he stations worshippers to sing songs to God in the presence of God (1 Chronicles 16:1–6, 37). This is where David penned many of the Psalms in your Bible, seated in the presence of God, with no veil between.

Why would David do something so scandalous? Because he understood that God never desired the separation between God and man. He saw that the tabernacle of Moses did not restore Eden, it only managed the problem. He saw that the law and its requirements for worship were, as the author of Hebrews would later say, a shadow of the good things to come and not the substance itself (Hebrews 10:1). He knew then what we know now, that the Lord does not finally desire burnt offerings and sacrifices, but a broken spirit and a contrite heart (Psalm 40:6).

> PSALM 51:16–17
>
> *For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.*
>
> *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*
>
> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

This is the first time music appears as an institutional form of worship; David even stationed musicians at the tabernacle of Moses just down the road. David would die, his son would build the first temple, and music would no longer be the defining act of worship there, yet singing remained woven into the whole experience of worship.

ACT FIVE

The Prophets

Then come the prophets, and they say the same thing David said. God does not want sacrifices, He wants hearts. He does not want offerings, He wants lives. To obey is better than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22). I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6). And most pointedly for a sermon on worship, God tells a singing people to take their music away, because songs offered without justice are noise to Him.

> AMOS 5:23–24
>
> *Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.*
>
> *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*
>
> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

What He requires has not changed: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

ACT SIX

Jesus the Christ

Then Jesus enters. The heart of worship that David had recovered was long gone by the time Jesus arrived; worship had slid back to what it was under the tabernacle of Moses, purely ritual. You performed the right task, in the right way, at the right time, in the right place. Jesus, like David and more than David, understood that this was no longer worship. It was dead ritual performed by dead people, and He spent much of His ministry demonstrating that dead worship through dead ritual was no longer acceptable. He cleansed the temple, He predicted its destruction, and He called Himself the temple (John 2:13–22; Matthew 24:1–2; Matthew 12:6).

And then He has that arresting conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4, after she raises the old question of which mountain is the right place to worship.

> JOHN 4:21–24
>
> *Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.*
>
> *You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.*
>
> *But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.*
>
> *God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."*
>
> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

In other words, the way you worship is about to change. You will no longer go to a place to worship; you will worship in spirit and truth. He is not merely relocating worship. He is abolishing location as the defining mark of it.

ACT SEVEN

The Holy Spirit and the Epistles

Then Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, and we become walking temples. Paul puts it plainly: do you not know that you are the dwelling place of God, that you yourselves are the temple, that God is with you and in you (1 Corinthians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 6:19; Ephesians 2:22)? This is stunning. Because the Spirit now lives inside us, worship has changed again. It has gone back to what it was in the garden before the fall. Like Adam and Eve, everything we do is now worship, because everything is done with Him, before Him, and for Him. We are worshipping in spirit and truth. Worship is relationship again, not ritual, which is why Paul tells us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice.

> ROMANS 12:1
>
> *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*
>
> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

Worship is no longer confined to a certain act in a certain place. Worship is meant to be everything we do, because we are to do everything for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17; 1 Peter 2:5). Now worship is working honestly, raising children, forgiving enemies, serving neighbors, loving spouses, fighting temptation, giving generously, and bearing suffering faithfully. Every act of obedience becomes another offering laid before God. Worship is doing something with God as your motivation.

Worship is not a twenty-minute section of our gathering. It is the summation of our life.

And I think what we often do is take our instructions for worship from the middle of the story. We look at David and build our theology of worship from him, instead of from the garden. So some of you have concluded you are not a worshipper because you do not like to sing, or because, like me, you cannot sing. You are a worshipper. Every believer is a worshipper. And it can feel, when someone is not singing or lifting their hands, that they are not worshipping. That simply is not true.

So can we all agree that worship cannot be reduced to singing songs to God? Good. Then for the rest of our time, let us change our language and talk about Corporate Singing.

A MOMENT TO EXAMINE

Before we go further, sit with one question. When you long for a service where the Spirit shows up, have you forgotten that the Spirit showed up the moment you walked in, already dwelling in you?

The difference on any given Sunday is rarely the song list or the sound of the keys. It is whether you have come with a heart full of affection and a life that backs it up. So where do you locate the presence of God: in the music, or in the God who already lives in you?

Statements on Corporate Singing

In light of everything we have traced, I want to make two statements about worship that may feel uncomfortable.

First, corporate singing does not conjure or summon God's manifest presence.

There is no New Testament link between our gathering to sing and God showing up in a heightened way. That does not mean God cannot, has not, or will not show up in a more pronounced way; it means the New Testament never ties that to corporate singing. The presence of God is already in us and with us. What happens is that we say we want a church where the Spirit shows up, forgetting that the Spirit showed up when we got there. It is not that God arrives; it is that we arrive, with hearts full of adoration and lives that back it up. It is not the song selection, and it is not the keyboard with the angel sounds. It is your heart. And if someone objects that God inhabits the praises of His people, that line is worth examining. It is drawn from Psalm 22:3, where the King James reads that God inhabits the praises of Israel; the sense of the verse is that God is holy, enthroned over the praise of His covenant people, not that His presence materializes the moment we begin to sing.

Second, the New Testament never presents corporate singing as the defining activity of the gathered church.

Across Paul, James, John, and Peter, when the essential components of the gathering are named, corporate singing is not listed as a defining element. They are unanimous about what must happen when believers gather: prayer, the reading of Scripture, communion, and teaching, led by qualified individuals (Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 4:13; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). When Timothy and Titus are charged with overseeing churches, they are never told to appoint singers or musicians, and never told to sing when they come together; they are told to pray and to appoint elders and deacons (1 Timothy 2:1; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5). Even the church in Acts does not record corporate singing as a primary element of its gathering, but rather prayer, fellowship, communion, and teaching (Acts 2:42).

What seems to have been true is that singing was an organic element of the gathering rather than a required one. Picture believers in fellowship who simply begin to sing together. This matters, because in our culture worship is often treated as the most important element of a gathering. People choose churches not by the essentials Scripture names, but by how good the singing is. We will happily attend churches that do not pray, that do not take communion, that do not read and teach the Scriptures, and that do not order their leadership the way the Bible prescribes, as long as the musicians are excellent and the set list moves us. We cannot do that. We cannot forsake God's design for the gathering in favor of our own simply because we like ours better.

Why Do We Sing?

Let us get practical. If congregational singing does not bring a greater measure of God's presence, and is not the defining activity of the gathered church, then why do we have corporate singing at all? I am so glad you asked.

i. We sing because He is worthy.

In the same way that He is worthy of every other part of my life, He is worthy of my song. Heaven sings of His worth, so should we (Revelation 4:11; Revelation 5:9–13). He deserves songs of praise for all He has done (Psalm 96:1–2). But here is the nuance: we do not sing to bring Him near. We sing because He has already come near in Christ.

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ii. We sing because truth sticks better when it is sung.

Look at the language Paul uses, tying the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs directly to letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly.

> COLOSSIANS 3:16–17
>
> *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*
>
> *And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*
>
> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

Now this is a Christian Life verse, but it certainly applies to the gathering. How do I know it is not strictly a Church Order verse? The very next verses turn to wives and husbands, children and fathers, servants and masters (Colossians 3:18–21), the ordinary fabric of daily life. When truth is sung, it lodges in us with peculiar power. It is why you can still recall the words of your favorite songs thirty years after you learned them, and it is why God told Israel to write His instruction as a song and put it in their mouths, so that the song itself would stand as a witness (Deuteronomy 31:19). Paul almost treats singing as theology set to melody. Corporate singing is a form of discipleship; it is theological formation as much as it is celebration. Music is one of God's greatest discipleship tools.

iii. We sing to minister to one another.

The only other passage we have on corporate singing is Ephesians 5, and the language is worth slowing down for.

> EPHESIANS 5:18–21
>
> *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,*
>
> *giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*
>
> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

Do you see it? When we sing to one another, we are getting the Bible into one another, encouraging and admonishing one another, and to admonish is to warn. Paul says the same in Colossians, that we teach and admonish one another as we sing (Colossians 3:16), and he says elsewhere that when the church comes together, each one may bring a hymn for the building up of the body (1 Corinthians 14:26).

So here is what I need you to see. God's design for singing in the corporate gathering is not only vertical, it is also horizontal. When we sing as an element of our service, it is not only us singing to the Lord, it is us singing to one another. If it were only for the Lord, it could be silent, even sung in your head, because God hears it either way. But it is not only for the Lord. It is for one another, reminding each other of the hope we have in Christ and celebrating the goodness of God together, as we stir one another up and refuse to neglect meeting together (Hebrews 10:24–25). Which means you actually need to sing. You need to sing.

Communion

We are about to enter a time of communion, and we are going to sing. When we do, I want you to sing to one another. Even on the night He was betrayed, after the first Lord's Supper, Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn together before they went out into the night (Matthew 26:30). So as we take the bread and the cup and proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26), let your singing be a word of hope spoken across the room, from one believer to the next.

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Soli Deo Gloria

LEGACY CHURCH · SERMON NOTES

Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.