

## DEVOTED TO WORSHIP

Open your bible with me to Acts 2. Every Lord's Day, we gather with the saints of The Trails Church and have the remarkable privilege of witnessing a living miracle: a group of people who once were dead in sin, but now raised to life in Christ, congregate to praise the God who saves. In His great kindness, the worship-seeking God calls His people to worship Him. We begin each service by reading a passage of Scripture, through which the Lord Himself invites the great and the small, welcomes the young and the old, receives the strong and the weak to gather in the presence of the Living God. In response to His gracious call, we offer full-hearted adoration to God for who He is and how He has crowned us with steadfast love and mercy. (Ps. 103:4) We confess our darkest sins to the All-Knowing One believing He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9) We are assured that before the everlasting throne sits Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest whose precious blood allows us access to draw near to God. (Heb. 4:14-16) We give thanks to the Lord for the great things He has done in redemptive history and in our lives. (Psalm 105:1) We pray as "God's breath in us returns to its birth."<sup>1</sup> We read the Holy Scriptures publicly. (1 Tim. 4:13) God's Word is proclaimed as it illumines hearts and minds. In the Lord's Supper, we are seated at the table of the King as we eat from the bread of His provision and drink from the cup of His salvation. Ringing throughout the liturgy we sing songs of God's wisdom and ways, hymns of His salvation and grace, and spiritual songs of our life in Christ. With each element woven into this service, we worship God.

Over the last two weeks we have looked at a picture of the first Christian church in Acts 2—an antique picture of another living miracle. Most of this newly formed congregation was still dead in their sins even at the beginning of this chapter! But when they heard the good

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<sup>1</sup> Leland Ryken, ed., *The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2018), 88. From the poem "Prayer" by George Herbert.

news of the gospel preached, they repented of their sin and believed on Jesus as their Savior. Now they had been raised to life in Christ, and congregated to worship the God Who Saves. We have learned how these Christians in the Jerusalem church were devoted to being a learning church and a loving church, and now we will see that in all things they were a worshipping church.

It has been said that the pages of the New Testament are painfully silent when it comes to worship practices in the New Testament. There is no prescribed liturgy located in the gospels. There is no detailed manual for worship included in any of the epistles. Yet, if we survey the Scripture, not one book passes without making a valuable contribution to our understanding of Christian worship. Even as we focus once again on these handful of verses, we find multiple elements of congregational worship in seed form that continued to flower even until our day. While we don't see the whole picture of corporate worship in this passage, we do see the origin of how their life together was forever transformed and shaped by the worship of Christ. *How has your life been transformed and shaped by the worship of Christ?*

### **Sermon Summary**

At the center of the characteristics found in Acts 2:42-47 is a church "Devoted to Worship." The early church practiced a rhythm of worship as they grew in doctrine and devotion to Christ. They gathered to exalt, to encourage, and to proclaim the mighty works of God together. As we look to their example, we find rhythms of worship from Scripture that we aspire to know and grow in as a church. First, we will highlight how the church *Gathered to Worship*. Second, we will detail the *Acts of Worship* listed in our passage. Finally, we will see the impact of their *Evangelistic Worship*.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

## Gathered to Worship

The first reality to highlight is how the church *Gathered to Worship*. We noticed earlier their commitment to being together mentioned throughout this summary description. Verse 44 is careful to detail, “they were together.” They loved being in the temple not only on the Lord’s Day, but “day by day” to worship Jesus and night by night to experience the fellowship they shared in Christ. Their lives were intertwined as a community of faith. These new believers shared in hearing the good news of forgiveness in Jesus’ name together, they identified with Christ and His people through baptism together, and then they worshiped side by side together.

## Gathered and Scattered

Their devotion to gathering for worship was not bound only to one place, but multiple places: they worshiped publicly in the temple and privately in homes, gathered all together and scattered all around. First, we see that they *Gathered All Together (2:46)*. Before believers in Jesus were forced out of Jerusalem through persecution, the earliest days of Christian worship were experienced within the temple. The massive Jerusalem temple provided the largest available open space in Jerusalem and a natural place for teaching. The Temple Mount itself covers about 35 square acres where people often gathered to be together and to listen to lectures.<sup>2</sup> The early Christians continued to go to the temple regularly as a part of their life of worship. They gathered publicly with other believers during the hours of prayer and found the temple and synagogues to be the best place for them to gather and proclaim the good news about Jesus the Messiah.<sup>3</sup> The church gathered all together.

The church also *Scattered All Around (2:46)*. Just as the church met publicly in the temple, we learn also that they met in private homes. The church shrank into smaller groups of

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<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 1031.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 412.

Christians for the sake of continued fellowship. Some scholars suggest that early Christians used public meeting places to evangelize, but houses were used to do deeper and ongoing discipleship.<sup>4</sup> Christians practiced intentional hospitality by inviting other believers over for the sake of praying, discussing Scripture, singing, and sharing meals together. The church was not an add-on to an already packed schedule, it was the family that they belonged to. They gathered all together and scattered all around and in everything they understood that the church existed to worship and glorify God.

### **Devoted to Gathering**

We have said from the very first words of our mission statement that the reason we exist as a congregation is to glorify God. We exist ultimately to worship Him. Because of this we, like this early church, have intentionally created rhythms in the life of our church—gathered and scattered where we can go about fulfilling this mission. We gather on Sundays as an entire church body across two services and we also scatter in community groups, bible studies, and smaller groups of people both for the same purpose: to worship God. The environments look different: one is more formal and one is informal, one is more structured and the other spontaneous, and the church needs both.<sup>5</sup>

At the start of the sermon I described corporate worship as a living miracle. I see it no other way. I long to gather with you week by week and to be with you each Lord's Day. The writer of Hebrews 10:24-25 encourages us in this, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." As we see the Day of Christ's return draw near, I pray that we will never lose the wonder of corporate worship. That we will be devoted to gathering and scattering together as we grow as worshipers of Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1030.

<sup>5</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, The Church & The World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 83.

## Acts of Worship

Second, let's consider the *Acts of Worship* we find the church engaged in. Imagine what it would have been like to walk into a worship gathering of Christians when the book of Acts was written. The culture, dress, and language are far different than the ones we know, yet I suspect we would still recognize each element of the service as it came to pass. Everything might seem a little different than what we were used to, like driving a car in the UK. Let's scan once again this passage and see what acts of worship we recognize.

### Familiar Acts

The first acts of worship we find are *Scripture Reading and Teaching*. In Acts 2 we have record of the first Christian sermon where the Apostle Peter quoted from and preached on multiple passages of Scripture. We know from the broader witness of the New Testament and the early records of church history that the reading of Scripture was central to the worship of Christian churches. Paul writes to a young pastor in 1 Timothy 4 to “*devote* himself to the public reading of Scripture.” As we fast forward a hundred years, a man called Justin Martyr (AD 100-AD165) describes the worship of the early church from an eyewitness account. Justin reports that, “the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits.”<sup>6</sup> The “writings of the prophets” would be synonymous with the books of the Old Testament; and the “memoirs of the apostles” would be shorthand for what would eventually be known as the New Testament. Notice they read “as long as time permits.” A church may have only had a complete book of the Old Testament, or a copy of a Pauline letter, or even just a fragment of a gospel, but they read the Scripture as long as they could. The reading and teaching of Scripture played a central role in the liturgy from the earliest descriptions of Christian worship.

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Roberts et al., eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1994), 186.

The second acts of worship we see are *Prayer and Praise*. (2:42,47) The concluding verse of our passage this morning tells us that the people were “praising God.” (2:47) We are not told if the praise was whispered or shouted, sung or spoken, formal or informal, but we do know that praise is one of the characteristics of their worship. Hebrews 13:15 encourages us, “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.” The New Testament is full of praises that help us understand what kind of praise was offered to God by these early Christians. The kind of praise we find there follows the Old Testament pattern of blessing God for who he is and all he has done: his character and his actions.<sup>7</sup> For homework you might search the Scriptures and find different praises that you could make your own to help build your prayer life. Of course, it is no small thing that I have mentioned prayer as an act of worship. In fact, it is such an important matter it is listed as one of the four primary headings that the church was devoted to and will receive an entire sermon of attention next week.

The final acts of worship mentioned in this chapter are *Baptism and Communion*. As the crowd was cut to the heart with the good news of the gospel, they asked Peter what they should do. He replied, “Repent and be baptized.” That very day, 3,000 people were baptized as an act of worship that was given by Christ Himself. Baptism was a one-time act publicly identifying with Christ and communion was a repeated act of worship that Christians continued sharing in. Baptism is the front door into the household of God; the Lord’s Supper is the family meal. In verse 42 we read, “they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread.” The phrase ‘the breaking of bread’ is not an easy one to interpret. Good and godly people have disagreed on it through the ages. While some have held that this phrase means nothing more than a common meal, I believe this must be a reference to the Lord’s Supper. Kent Hughes outlines two

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<sup>7</sup> David Peterson, *Encountering God Together: Leading Worship Services That Honor God, Minister to His People, and Build His Church*, North American ed (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub, 2014), 118.

supporting reasons for this.<sup>8</sup> First, the reference stands in a line of religiously loaded terms in verse 42: teaching, fellowship, and prayers. It would not make logical sense to include a common action in this list of religious activities. Second, in verse 46 the phrases “breaking of bread” and “receive their food” are purposely separated suggesting that after the Christians ate a meal together, then they would transition to a time in the evening where they would remember and proclaim the death of Jesus Christ just as they had been instructed by observing the Lord’s Supper. In the reading and teaching of Scripture, prayer and praise, baptism and communion we find a description of worship from the early church. Is there one of the acts that you would like to grow in as a worshiper of Christ? Or perhaps one that we need to grow in as a congregation?

### **Evangelistic Worship**

Finally, I want us to note the church’s practice of *Evangelistic Worship*. There is a pattern that emerges by the time we reach the end of this chapter—a pattern of worship and evangelism. After the Spirit fell on the church, we read how the believers were praising God and telling His mighty works as unbelieving onlookers began to ask questions about what they were hearing. This made way for the gospel to be proclaimed. As a result, many were added to their number. What happens on a large scale in Acts happens in an individual case in 1 Corinthians 14. As Paul writes about the importance of order in their worship service, he anticipates an unbeliever who would experience the church in worship, hear the gospel of Christ, and right there fall down in conviction that God is real. These two examples show that it should be normal for unbelievers to attend Christian worship gatherings, that worship should be comprehensible to outsiders, and that nonbelievers might be convicted and converted through corporate worship. That has happened in this very room in the past. It could happen again this morning. As a matter of fact, if you are not a believer, we are honored to have you with us, and you are completely welcome to continue to come as long as you’d like as you seek to understand the message of the

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<sup>8</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, ESV edition, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2014), 50.

Bible, the claims of Christ, the doctrines of Christianity and what it means to be born again to a living hope. I pray that you would come to see that there is one True God who is the creator and sustainer of all things and that out of His love and joy He created you. Yet we have this innate problem: we are born sinners in need of salvation, we are separated from God because of our sin and we need to be made right with Him. So, God, out of great love for sinners, sent His one and only son Jesus Christ to live a perfect sinless life in our place and to die in the place of sinners. By placing your faith in Jesus and repenting of your sin, today could be the day of your salvation. Like the sinner mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14, this may be the day you are hearing for the first time who God is and how to be made right with Him. I pray if that is you, you would not leave this place without considering, repenting, humbling, and kneeling before Jesus Christ.

As we think about corporate worship, we have to think about discipleship, evangelism, and worship all at the same time. Tim Keller summarized:

If the Sunday service aims primarily at evangelism, it will bore the saints. If it aims primarily at education, it will confuse unbelievers. But if it aims at praising the God who saves by his grace, it will both instruct insiders and challenge outsiders. Good corporate worship will naturally be evangelistic.<sup>9</sup>

We do gather to make disciples, and we do gather to evangelize and proclaim Christ together, but the ultimate reason the church exists and the ultimate reason we gather is to worship God. From this primary aim we find the right place for both evangelism and discipleship—a twin focus on what should naturally happen as believers gather to worship. As we practice scripture reading and teaching, as we practice prayer and praise, as we celebrate the finished work of Jesus in the Lord’s Supper—in all our worship of God—let’s pray that believers might be edified and unbelievers might be evangelized.

### **A Gospel Bulletin**

As I thought about our shared practice of corporate worship and how evangelism fits within it, I thought it might be helpful to look at our bulletin together. If you have one near you,

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<sup>9</sup> D. A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2002), 218.



let me invite you to pull it out. I like to think of it not just as a church bulletin, but a gospel bulletin, a gospel announcement—even in the way we organize our services around the gospel.

If you look down the left-hand column, there are four headings that are not printed in ink but are nonetheless there shaping our service. The headings are God, Man, Christ, and Response. Our service begins with *God* calling His people to worship Him followed by hymns of thanks and praise that call us to behold who God is. Next, we think about *Man* and our great need for God's grace. We sing songs of our dependance upon Him and make room for confession of sin. The third movement of the service lifts our gaze to *Christ* as we hear the assurance of pardon through what Jesus has done for us. We open the Word of God and exalt Christ from the Scriptures. We *Respond* to God's revelation in prayer, asking that our lives would be consecrated to Him as an act of living worship. We sing a hymn of response before we receive the benediction.

Every week we gather around the gospel. Each Lord's Day we rehearse the gospel: who is God, who is man, who is Christ, and how do we respond rightly? Why do we do this? Because the gospel of Jesus is the greatest need for saint and sinner alike. We never outgrow our need for the gospel, so we proclaim it together every time we gather.

Look for a moment with me at this week's service to see it for yourself. What has been said or will be said? We heard in the call to worship that even the kings of the nations will bow down before the Lord. We sang of the God who is the creator of all things and the redeemer of His people. We gave thanks to Him for all He's done and all He's given. We confessed the brokenness of the world and how Jesus is our only hope. We have opened the Word of God and seen how at the center of the story is the Savior Jesus Christ. In a moment we will confess our sins and be reminded that the only assurance we have before a holy God is the finished work of the cross. We will share in the Lord's Supper to remember and proclaim the body that was broken for our transgression, and the blood that was spilled for our sin. Then we will receive the blessing of God through His Word as we are sent back into the world. Every week we gather

around the gospel and the gospel transforms and shapes everything about our life together, even the way we worship.

### **Conclusion**

I pray that in the weeks to come when we enter for worship it won't be lackadaisical or too comfortable, but that we will recognize the beauty, transcendence, and holiness of each moment when God's people gather in His name. May we grow in our devotion to God and be wholly *Devoted to Worship*.

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