

Worship Better!

Romans 12: 1-2; Hebrews 13: 15

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**May 2, AD 2021
Gerrit Scott Dawson**



Every so often, I think it's healthy to reflect on this most basic activity of the gathered church: our worship. If we become more aware of what we're doing and get more intentional about the way we worship, we can worship better. That is, we can be more vibrant, more robust, more lifted up and more compelling to the world.

Our passage from Hebrews urges us, "Through [Jesus] let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Heb. 13: 15). Raising up the name of Jesus is fruitful. It draws us into Christ. It shines a light into the world. It magnifies the God who saved us and our very enthusiasm for this Savior becomes a magnet to others who are lost. Praise releases joy. Worship is an activity that is not empty. It fills hearts. It generates new life. Its effects ripple out from the hour through the rest of the week.

But worship is not easy. I'm conditioned by all the television I watch to be a passive consumer of entertainment. I turn on the show and think, "Comfort me! Entertain me! Make me laugh and make me cry." And if I don't get moved, I blame the show. Bad writing. Bad actors. What's the matter that you couldn't stir the blob on the couch tonight? It's all too easy to be in this mode when I come to worship at church. "Wake me up musicians! Rouse me preacher! Sing the songs I like! Bring me some coffee and make people be nice to me!" But our Hebrews passage reminds us that in worship *we* bring a *sacrifice* of praise. Worship takes effort. It takes preparation and intentionality.

As Presbyterians, we have a document called *The Book of Worship*. It contains direction for how we put worship together. The book tells us who's in charge, how to make the order of worship, what's the point of each part in a service. It also speaks about this preparation and intentionality:

No Christian should come to the Lord's Day unprepared. Hearts should be prepared that worshippers might be ready to hear and receive the Word of the

Lord. Daily affairs should be taken care of beforehand and the day should be spent in rest, free from the cares and concerns of ordinary works and words...

Remembering beforehand to pray for the minister, for those who gather to worship, for those who are providentially hindered and for themselves.

All should be present at the appointed hour, unite in all parts of the worship and depart only when the benediction has been pronounced. (*EPC Book of Worship*, 2.3)

Were they spying on me? It seems we're not the only people in Christian history to face the struggle to get dressed, get out of the house and be on time. We're not the first people to stay up too late on Saturday and drag in unfocussed and tired on Sunday. We're not the first people to have too much else to do on Sundays. And it seems like others also get distracted during worship and don't always sing out. *The Book of Worship* knows me, and so its advice is sound.

Sunday is the Lord's Day. We meet on the first day of the week, the day our Lord Jesus rose from the dead. My whole week points towards the way I will start the new week to come: in God's house with his people declaring the excellency of the person and work of Jesus. I'm to get ready ahead of time. No athlete goes into a game by rolling out of bed 20 minutes before kickoff. Every athlete takes the field by first studying the playbook, learning the game-plan and practicing. On game day athletes follow a plan to eat, stretch and warm up—everything is done with a view towards the game. Otherwise, the players won't play well. They'll be flat, slow, and easily injured.

I want to say it plainly. If you want to get more out of worship, put more into worship ahead of time. If you want to make a sacrifice of praise that pleases Christ, you'll have to start earlier. We always publish in the Sunday order of worship the Scriptures that we will be considering next week. They're online and in the monthly newsletter. It makes a lot of sense to read the Scriptures the night or morning before. To get up early enough to pray for the worship leaders, my fellow church leaders and even for myself that I might truly offer myself to God when I gather with his people.

The Book of Worship also speaks about the mystery of what happens when you and I meet over a passage of Scripture during the message. The book places a lot of responsibility on me as your preacher:

The sermon should be related to the particular congregation and the individuals within it. It should address the real issues of the community of faith and should include practical application to life. It should be framed in such terms that all present can understand. Such preaching demands study, meditation, prayer and time for adequate preparations. *Above all, that which is preached should be exemplified in the life of the preacher. (Worship, 2.6).*

I'm never quite sure what to say when someone asks, "How long does it take you to write a sermon?" The actual keyboard to screen time happens on Thursday morning. But the process demands my whole attention throughout my whole life. A preacher has to quest for Christ in his Word. A preacher has to listen to the lives of his people. A preacher has to be aware of the current culture and aware of the seasons of history. A preacher has to pray, to read, and to give his life to being authentic. You ought to demand no less than this from your preachers and worship leaders. Chris Phillips, the other pastors and I promise you preparation, passion and presence. You get to demand that. For us, it's an awesome task and an indescribable joy.

But there is also a huge part a congregation plays in making a message connective and lively. The book says,

Even as the preacher is to make proper preparation, so the worshipper is to be prepared in every way to respond...As God speaks through the Word as it is read and preached, cutting hearts, giving guidance in the Christian life, building up in the faith, the worshipper has a solemn duty to be open and receptive to God's revelation. (EPC *Book of Worship*, 2.6).

We come expectant that God will speak to us as we approach his Word in reliance on his Holy Spirit. We plan ahead to be here ready to engage the worship hour. We ask God to speak to us. We pray that Christ will lift us up on his shoulders to join in his praise to his Father. We expect to respond to what God reveals to us. And even if the preacher stinks, we're going to look at the passage, dig out truth from it and let God speak to us. It takes the two of us, the preacher and the congregation, eagerly meeting each other over the Word to make a message work. In the same way, it takes the two of us, the worship leaders and the congregation, to meet over the songs, the prayers and praises to make worship vibrant and connective.

This morning, we've put the message first in the order, so that we can allow this time to prepare us to engage in worship more passionately. So, as we get ready, I'd like just to highlight a few ideas:



1) Consider worship a journey. Every worship hour we are journeying out of ordinary life into the extraordinary presence of God. Jesus promises to meet us when we gather in his name. Every journey takes some level of sacrifice. You are setting aside the time it takes for the journey. You are making preparations. You are enduring the rigors of the journey.

You are giving attention to the needs of the travel. Worship is not passive. We're not just sitting here waiting for something to happen to us, if only the worship leaders find the key to motivating us. We're questing. Pressing into Christ by looking away from ourselves to him.

We're climbing the ladder as our hearts and voices rise on the words and music of songs and spoken prayers. We're reaching toward the truth as we dialogue with the preacher over the Word. We're pressing into our union with Christ as we come to the table and partake of him. We journey from ordinary life into the extraordinary presence of God. When the hour is over, one part of us will feel excited to go get some coffee or lunch. But another part of us will feel sad. We have to leave this place? We have to part from these people? We have to go back out into the world? Yes, we have to journey back out into the world where we shine light into people's darkness. We reenter the life where we serve others as we do our work and fulfill our responsibilities. We go back out in Christ's name, with his flame rekindled in our hearts, to be his hands and feet and voice in the world. We journey in to get refreshed from arriving at our destination: a meeting with the Triune God of grace. We journey back out to the world as his servants.



2) Take others with you. Staying focused in worship isn't easy. I know my mind can wander even when I'm singing. But I've discovered a way to engage my attention and expand my heart. I become aware that I am not alone. Every Christmas Eve, I become very aware that there are a lot more people in the room than the bodies in the pew. At Christmas, people carry other people in their hearts into the sanctuary. People who

couldn't make it home. People we miss. People we are worried about. People with whom we are estranged. People who have died. Our hearts are full of people not there. I realize that it's not just at Christmas, it's all the time. I like to become aware of who is with me, in my heart. And I like to sing with them. And for them. When I'm singing, I try to imagine a loved one burdened with guilt one day singing freely of this grace. I imagine a broken heart mending as she sings. I imagine a rebellious prodigal son running home to his Father. I imagine enemies and people who have hurt my loved ones joining the redeemed community in the joyful worship of Christ Jesus who has reconciled the world to himself. It changes worship for me. I also like to look around sometimes and see who is here. I become aware that this one is grieving a loss; that one is healing from a surgery; this person is worried about a child; this one needs better work. I glance at them and I include them in the voice of my songs. It makes me realize how important it is to sing and pray with others in mind and in the room. And it fills my own heart to see how powerful is this gospel we proclaim.



3) Realize we are not alone! On Easter morning, I get up around 4:30 to have plenty of time to prepare for the Great Day. Sometimes, in that quiet darkness, I think about where the celebration of Easter has already begun. In Malaysia, MacGregor and Ashley Magruder's Easter sunrise is already 12 hours old. Albert Ratkin proclaimed the resurrection in Kaluga, Russia 8 hours ago. 7 hours ago, Sameh Maurice preached in Cairo. David Torrance prepared to say "The Lord is Risen!" in Edinburgh 6 hours ago. And in just a little while, my beloved congregation in Baton Rouge will step into the stream of this praise. We will take our turn as dawn reaches us to declare the news. And a couple hours from now my friend Mark Toon will be up in Gig Harbor, WA to declare that Christ the Lord is risen today. All over the world the praise flows.

And then I think of the first witnesses. "We have seen the Lord!" Mary exclaimed to the disciples. Her words are not lost in the waterfall of time. She still speaks as a billion people hear her words. John Chrysostom's sermon from the 4th century is still read on Easter Day throughout the world: "Christ is risen, and you O death are annihilated!" And somewhere John Donne has been quoted in a church, "Death be not proud... Death, thou shalt die!" Easter resounds with voices across the world and through time.

And then I realize this is not just on Easter. Nor is it just on earth. A very ancient prayer draws on Revelation 4 to declare, “Therefore we join our voices with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven who forever sing this hymn, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.’” Angelic beings are singing the praise of the Triune God around his throne. They are singing with us. Or perhaps it is truer to say that for a moment, for our brief hour, we are singing with the angels who never cease.

It’s silly if I think that the worship of the risen Jesus is just what our little church does for a couple hours on Sunday in our little block in our little town in Baton Rouge. It’s silly if I think the measure of worship is merely whether or not *I* get something out of it. Or whether or not the message and the music are right. Worship is huge! And it’s a priceless gift. For an hour I get to step into the stream that has been flowing from all eternity. I get to splash in the water of life with all the believers who have ever lived. I get to harmonize my voice with the angel choirs. I get connected to every believer around the world. And even throughout time. Oh my! What else could I possibly rather be doing?

So now, we get to do it. To step into the stream with intentionality and energy. To make our way to the Table of grace where the Lord himself nourishes us with nothing less than his body and blood. We get to journey together, with those in this room, those online, those around the world, and throughout all time. Let’s go!