# ALL WE HAVE IS CHRIST: THE CENTRALITY OF UNION WITH CHRIST IN THE CHURCH'S CORPORATE WORSHIP

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**APPROVAL SHEET**

ALL WE HAVE IS CHRIST: THE CENTRALITY OF UNION WITH CHRIST IN THE CHURCH'S CORPORATE WORSHIP

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For Kristine, my bride and best friend, and for our four children: Korey, Kyleigh, Knox, and Kaitlyn. May you always grow to delight in the life received in Christ.

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# PREFACE

No project of this magnitude can be finished alone. Many have encouraged me, challenged me, and prayed for me along the way, and for that I am profoundly grateful. Ten years ago, I had no inclination that my life would take this path. But thanks be to God for his sovereign and good hand, which has kept me every step of this journey.

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No journey would be as fulfilling undertaken alone. I have been blessed to

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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## Knowing One's Story

Stories are central to human life. Literary theorist, Barbara Hardy, explains that "there is an inner and outer storytelling that plays a major role in our sleeping and waking lives."[1] She continues, "We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative."[2] These narratives comprise the fabric of life. In his work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that each member of humanity is "essentially a story-telling animal."[3] The stories that people tell go far beyond entertainment or novelty. They determine how humanity lives. MacIntyre writes, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can first answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"[4] Stories present an understanding of the past and a vision for the future which informs present practice and action. The world is shaped by stories.

Stories bring a sense of unity to human identity. They provide a framework for understanding life as a whole. This leads to a "concept of self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to

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[1] Barbara Hardy, "Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach through Narrative," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 2, no. 1 (1968): 5.

[2] Hardy, "Towards a Poetics of Fiction," 5.

[3] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (1981; repr., Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216.

[4] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.

end."[5] Various narratives vie for significance over the course of each day, week, month, season, year, and life. Stories are told all around as they endeavor to shape one's understanding of truth, one's vision for the good life, and one's perspective on what really matters.

When the church gathers each week for corporate worship, it tells stories. These stories are presented both explicitly and implicitly through preaching, prayer, singing, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the shape that these public practices take on.[6] They communicate truth, foster values, and offer perspective on life and eternity. Corporate worship holds out to all believers an opportunity to be reoriented to reality, to be conformed to the one true narrative as determined by God. His story runs counter to the stories the world declares. When the church worships together it should gather to tell the right story, the good story, the true story, again and again through its practice and proclamation.

Unfortunately, humans often exhibit a propensity to insert themselves at the center of the narrative which makes up their lives. When a person is the central character of his or her life narrative, all other characters merely become supporting actors, finding their place in *my* story. This presents a problem for those who profess to be Christians, since it relegates God to a supporting role.[7] This leads to believers telling stories of faith marked by finding God and of asking Jesus into their hearts. When this is one's

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[5] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 205.

[6] I include the "shape" of corporate worship to highlight the fact that it is not only what is said that communicates, but also how it is said and even when it is said. The structure of corporate worship matters. Bryan Chappell writes, "Structures tell life stories, reveling the principles and priorities of the people who formed them. The structure of a church's liturgy also inevitably tells its understanding of the gospel story. This means the worship structures that communicate the gospel are themselves shaped by the gospel." Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 85. See also Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Dallas: Word, 1985), 29.

[7] Pastor Matthew McCullough writes that God becomes "a secondary character defined by how he comes into my story." Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 75.

understanding of how God fits into a personal narrative, the gospel is deprived of its power and significance. People need a story better than the one they so often tell themselves, and corporate worship provides a means of regularly telling and hearing that story.

MacIntyre goes on to argue that history should be understood as "enacted dramatic narrative."[8] Here characters must be viewed as those whose beginnings precede that of the story. MacIntyre writes, "They plunge *in media res*, the beginnings of their story already made for them by what and who has gone before."[9] For the Christian, identity does not begin with conversion, nor does it begin at the individual's birth. Rather, when Christians are born again they are "plunged *in media res,*" as it were, finding their story absorbed into Christ's story. When the Christian's story is established in Christ, something far more radical than Jesus invading one's story takes place. His story becomes the Christian's story. This is union with Christ and this union brings definition to the identity of every believer.

The idea that Christian identity is rooted in Christ may seem abstract, but the narrative of Christ's life, death, and resurrection animates the Christian life from its beginning and into eternity. John Murray writes that the Christian "cannot think of past, present, or future apart from union with Christ."[10] The Christian's identity in Christ and with Christ is held together in the narrative of redemption which God established before the foundation of the world. In Christ, God initiates and acts upon the Christian, choosing his children before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4; 2 Tim 1:9). In Christ, the Christian receives reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sin, and right standing before

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[8] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 215.

[9] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 215.

[10] John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (1955; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 175.

God (Rom 8:14-16; 2 Cor 5:17). In Christ, the Christian obtains new life as a new creation in a new community, participating with the Spirit in living into this God-given identity (Rom 6:3-7; 2 Cor 5:18-19; Eph 2:5-6, 13-16; 1 Pet 2:4-5). In Christ, the Christian anticipates entering into an everlasting inheritance, the resurrection life, and the glory to come (Rom 8:16-17; 1 Cor 15:22; Col 1:27; 1 Pet 5:10). Union with Christ provides each Christian with a controlling narrative and determinative framework.

Union with Christ has been described as "the taproot of our entire salvation."[11] John Calvin declares that "the sum of the gospel" are the gifts "conferred on us by Christ," which are "newness of life and free reconciliation."[12] Union with Christ is a central theme in Scripture, throughout church history, and in the church's witness today.[13] This reality is one of the most precious truths for the Christian. While there is a vast body of literature aiming to define union with Christ and apply it to the life of the Christian,

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[11] J. I. Packer, "The Atonement in the Life of the Christian," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 417.

[12] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (1960; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 3.3.1.

[13] Recent studies on the doctrine of union with Christ in Scripture include Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Michael J. Thate, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Constantine R. Campbell, *"In Christ" in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation* (2014; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018). The doctrine's prevalence in church history can be seen in Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); Marcus P. Johnson, "Luther and Calvin on Union with Christ," *Fides et Historia* 39, no. 2 (2007): 59–77; J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Kelly M. Kapic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); J. Stephen Yuille, *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel's Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2007). Lastly, several recent works have focused on the need to recover this doctrine in the life of the Christian. For example, Kevin DeYoung writes, "Union with Christ may be the most important doctrine you've never heard of. . . . it is the best phrase to describe all the blessings of salvation." Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 94; see also Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance: Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2016).

little attention has been given to the relationship of union with Christ and the gathered worship of the church.[14] If the Christian receives all the benefits of salvation in Christ—that "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" is bestowed in Christ (Eph 1:3)—then what bearing does the source of these benefits and blessings have on the church's practice of corporate worship? What part does union with Christ play when the church gathers for its weekly worship?

## Thesis

The weekly gathering of the church for corporate worship presents the church with an opportunity to be reoriented to reality. Ultimate reality for the people of God is grounded in who they are as those united to Christ. No one can approach the triune God apart from being in Christ. Accordingly, corporate worship in the church must be intentionally shaped by and centered on the reality of union with Christ. The doctrine of union with Christ recognizes that the identity of the church and its basis for relating to and worshiping the triune God is rooted in Jesus Christ alone; thus, the church should be tethered to Christ at every point of its corporate worship, where—enabled by the Holy Spirit and governed by the Word of God—the church assembles to gratefully witness to the revelation of the triune God by receiving from Christ, acting in him, and longing for him to come again. This work argues that union with Christ should be central to the church's understanding and practice of corporate worship.

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[14] A notable exception is seen in the work of J. Todd Billings, first, with his 2011 work *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011). Subsequently, Billings has sought to address this lacunae, particularly in the church's practice of the Lord's Supper. See Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018). Marcus Johnson also highlights the relationship between union with Christ and preaching and the sacraments, albeit only briefly in the concluding chapter of his book. See Johnson, *One with Christ*, 213–40.

## Methodology and Delimitations

Over the ensuing pages, I follow a similar strategy to the recent work of J. Todd Billings. In *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope* Billings presents a "synthetic and constructive" argument for a theology and practice of the Lord's Supper that is both "Reformed" and "catholic" and that leads to "a deeper, more multifaceted sense of the gospel."[15] He begins by demonstrating the "functional theology" of salvation shown through the church's practice of communion, following this discussion with a presentation of the theological vision necessary for a renewed understanding of the Lord's Supper.[16] After further development of the theological foundation, Billings turns to the heart of his book by describing how the Lord's Supper leads to a deeper experience of the gospel.[17]

This dissertation follows a similar pattern. I begin by presenting the functional theology manifest in corporate worship in today's evangelical church.[18] Next, I establish the theological framework necessary for renewing corporate worship, followed by an analysis of how union with Christ functioned in John Calvin's understanding and practice of corporate worship. Finally, I present a definition of corporate worship in light of union with Christ that articulates how this union should inform and shape the church's understanding and practice of corporate worship. This work differs from Billings's in that

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[15] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 1.

[16] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 5–56.

[17] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 107–200.

[18] The "evangelical church" is an admittedly broad and somewhat ambiguous designation. In a general sense I am referring to those that George Marsden has defined as "affirm[ing] the basic beliefs of the old nineteenth-century evangelical consensus." George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 4–5. Marsden details these beliefs as follows: "(1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life" (4–5). While I am writing to address issues amidst the broader evangelical church, I identify myself within a more specific subset of this group: reformed evangelical. This group would generally affirm the confessional statement of The Gospel Coalition.

it relates union with Christ to the main activities and disposition of the church in its corporate worship, not solely in the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, instead of only focusing on the church's activity in worship, the project gives attention to the transformed disposition that union with Christ cultivates in the church's corporate worship. This project can ultimately be understood as an exercise in what Jean-Jacques von Allmen has called "Liturgiology."[19]

The most significant delimitation of this study is its focus on the application of union with Christ to the gathered worship of the church. *Worship* in its broadest sense encompasses what each person does throughout all of life.[20] Instead of addressing worship broadly, this study narrowly focuses on the activities associated with the church's liturgy: its weekly gathering together in corporate worship.[21] After developing an ontological framework for corporate worship, detailing an expression of this in the history of the church, and presenting a working definition of corporate worship, this study explores the implications of union with Christ on the distinct liturgical activities that can be described as biblically prescribed, historically practiced, and corporately

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[19] Von Allmen describes liturgiology, or "the theology of Christian worship," as having "for its special work, not to create, but to examine, test and direct formal worship, so that it may approximate as closely as possible to what it should be." Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 13. Liturgiology should be understood as separate from but related to the discipline of "liturgical theology." Gregg Allison defines liturgical theology as "the discipline that studies the nature, attributes, and mighty works of God employing as its source the liturgy—the actual experience of worship—of the church." Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 37. Where liturgiology studies the church's worship through the lens of theology, liturgical theology studies theology through the lens of the church's worship. For some examples of liturgical theology see Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1966); Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

[20] For definitions of *worship* in its broad sense, see David G. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 20; Allen Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 67–68.

[21] Bryan Chapell describes liturgy as "the public way a church honors God in its times of gathered praise, prayer, instruction, and commitment." Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 18.

executed. The elements of corporate worship I discuss are proclaiming God's Word, praying, singing, and the sacraments. Other recent studies have analyzed the same four factors, and while there are additional aspects of corporate worship that could be considered, such as the exercise of spiritual gifts, fellowship, or giving, these fail to meet all three criteria for inclusion.[22]

## Structure

The first chapter of this dissertation presents an underlying problem with the contemporary evangelical approach to corporate worship. I demonstrate that the functional theology of corporate worship prevalent in contemporary evangelicalism is predominantly unitarian and anthropocentric; to do so I utilize the work of various scholars who evaluate the church's corporate worship today. This functional theology has deleterious effects on the church and its worship as Christ is relegated to a diminished role. To combat this deficient theology, the church needs to address both belief and practice, doctrine and worship.

The second chapter establishes the ontological framework for Christian worship that maintains a clear conception of ultimate reality when the church gathers. A biblical understanding of corporate worship must begin with the nature and revelation of the triune God who is independent, good, and self-communicative. He is the starting point for Christian worship. Because of God's fellowship with himself and revelation of

[22] In his study of worship in the free church tradition, Christopher Ellis focuses his attention on these same four factors, namely, "prayer, preaching, singing, and sacraments." Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Spirituality and Theology of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 103. In a similar fashion, Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey propose eleven different liturgical principles for worshiping in the tradition of the Reformers. Some of these principles necessitate corporate action, which can be summarized under the four tasks of hearing God's Word, praying, singing, and participating in the sacraments. Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey, *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 52–72. Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth take a similar approach in their evaluation of the contemporary worship movement by looking at music, prayer, the handling of God's Word, and the sacraments, in addition to evaluating the movement's conception of time and space. Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017).

himself, the church can worship God. But the evangelical church often suffers from the problem of "identity amnesia" in its practice of corporate worship.[23] It is the failure to remember the church's identity that leads to a distortion of what the church is to do when it gathers. Who the church is—its ontological identity—is fundamental to its understanding and approach to corporate worship. Chapter 2 describes the nature of the church and then locates the source of the church's identity in union with Christ, situated in the context of the triune God. This chapter's aim is to establish the centrality of union with Christ in the worship of the church, and to point to union with Christ as the key to developing an ontological foundation for the church as it gathers in corporate worship. Union with Christ is the key to unlocking what is real and what matters most when the church gathers.

The third chapter evaluates how an understanding of union with Christ effected the practice of corporate worship for John Calvin. Where the second chapter focuses on how doctrine determines worship, chapter 3 aims to describe how the doctrine of union with Christ was brought to bear on the liturgical thinking of Calvin. The aim is to explore how an understanding of union with Christ particularly shaped the liturgy that emerged from Calvin's thinking, with a view towards understanding this doctrine's impact on Christian identity, and in turn how this then determines the practice of corporate worship.

Chapter 4 considers the strengths and weaknesses of a prevailing metaphor for corporate worship, namely, worship-as-dialogue, and then argues that an embrace of union with Christ mitigates against these weaknesses. Subsequently, this chapter develops a working definition of corporate worship informed by the doctrine of union with Christ

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[23] I first came across this phrase in the writing of Paul Tripp. See Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 67, 79, 194. Tripp broadly addresses how Christians often forget who they are: "Human beings are always assigning to themselves some kind of identity. There are only two places to look. Either you will be getting your identity vertically, from who you are in Christ, or you will be shopping for it horizontally in the situations, experiences, and relationships of your daily life" (22).

that takes the nature of the church into account. The working definition presented is that corporate worship is God's Spirit-enabled and Word-governed gift, initiated by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, for his covenant people to gratefully assemble in space and time to witness to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit through proclamation, prayer, singing, and the sacraments, as they receive from Christ, act in him, and long for him to come again. The remainder of the chapter then discusses the first half of this definition, focusing on corporate worship as the triune God's gracious gift to his covenant people.

The fifth chapter considers the second half of the definition of corporate worship presented in the preceding chapter. It addresses the church's practice of corporate worship in light of being united to Christ. Chapter 5 answers the questions, "What is it that the church is called to do when it gathers?" "Where and when should the church gather?" "Why should it gather for corporate worship?" and "How does corporate worship take place in Christ?" The chapter identifies the rhythm of the church's worship as between Word and witness, arguing that corporate worship is an assembly of God's people in space and time to witness to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit by receiving from Christ, acting in him, and longing for him to come again. The second half of the chapter addresses how receiving, acting, and longing are expressed in proclamation, prayer, singing, and the celebration of the sacraments.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by summarizing the arguments presented. It connects the importance of union with Christ to the church's understanding and practice of corporate worship. It also highlights some of the broader implications of union with Christ on the disposition of the church in corporate worship, before concluding with suggested areas for further study related to this topic.

## Statement of the Problem

"It is impossible to understand either the history of worship or its condition in

any given era without first taking into account the factor of liturgical piety," wrote Alexander Schmemann.[24] Liturgical piety is not the same as the liturgy, or a description of what the church does when it gathers. Rather, liturgical piety is understood as the "religious sense," or what the activities that take place in corporate worship mean to the Christians participating in these actions.[25] The interesting thing to note about liturgical piety is that it can change from age to age. The meaning that was once assigned to a particular act of corporate worship can change over time, so while the elements of worship may be the same, liturgical piety alters "the reception, the experience, the understanding of worship."[26] In order to understand the need for an approach to worship centered on union with Christ, one must first grasp the liturgical piety that largely shapes evangelicalism's current understanding and approach to corporate worship.

A key to understanding the religious sense of the modern age is found in *Soul Searching*, the 2005 work by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, which evaluates the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers.[27] Through a staggering compilation of fascinating first-hand accounts and robust surveys, Smith and Denton conclude that the dominant religion among teenagers in America is what they term "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (MTD). MTD is built on five primary beliefs: (1) there is

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[24] Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 99. While I do not endorse Schmemann's theology, Wolterstorff describes him as "the finest liturgical theologian of the Orthodox Church in the twentieth century." Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 3–4. He also identifies Swiss theologian Jean-Jacques von Allmen as "the finest twentieth-century liturgical theologian of the Reformed tradition." Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 9.

[25] Schmemann's definition of liturgical piety is "the psychological acceptance of the cult, its experience within the religious mind, its refraction within the consciousness of the believer." Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 97.

[26] Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 127. He also writes, "Piety can accept the cult in a 'key' other than that in which it was conceived and expressed as text, ceremony or 'rite.' Liturgical piety has the strange power of 'transposing' texts or ceremonies, of attaching a meaning to them which is not their plain or original meaning" (98).

[27] Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

a God exists who watches over the world; (2) this God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other; (3) the purpose of life is to be happy; (4) God is only really present when he's needed to solve a problem; and (5) good people go to heaven after death.[28]

Smith and Denton describe MTD as "colonizing many historical religious traditions," and then, using traditional religion as a foundation, morphs into a religion whose purpose is "personal happiness and interpersonal niceness."[29] The authors conclude, "We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten step-cousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."[30] The teenagers described in *Soul Searching* have now all grown-up and their views in large measure describe the liturgical piety of the current age. The individual acts of corporate worship and the collective effect of those acts amounts to a liturgical piety built around the individual person and practices that make one feel happy and holy.

The insights that Smith and Denton offer fall in line with a chorus of voices over the last half century who have bemoaned the inadequacy of the church's understanding of and approach to worship. The challenge to the church has been that, like MTD's offer of a human-centered alternative to Christianity, the practice of corporate worship in America has exhibited a tendency to be oriented around people and their needs. John Jefferson Davis summarizes the problem:

> Contemporary evangelical Christians have lost their awareness of the *presence of the living and holy God* as the central reality of all true worship. And contemporary evangelicals, reflecting the influence of modern and postmodern culture, have shifted their focus in worship from the *objective* to the *subjective*, from the invisible God who is at the center of the event, to the visible preachers and praise leaders who

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[28] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162–63.

[29] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 171.

[30] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 171.

> are leading the events on stage, and to their own subjective feelings and desires. Human actions have now come to occupy the center stage on Sunday mornings, and God is pushed to the margins.[31]

Many factors have influenced the church in this direction over time, from Enlightenment rationalism to nineteenth-century revivalism to the Church Growth Movement of the twentieth century.[32] The cumulative effect of these cultural developments has contributed to an approach to corporate worship within contemporary evangelicalism that is marked by what humans think, do, and feel. But perhaps the failing expression of the church's worship comes not so much from outside of it, but from what is in it.

Problems in the church, overwhelmingly, stem from identity amnesia. The people of God have an incessant propensity to forget who they are. This is Paul's message to the Corinthian church seen in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. Paul urges the Corinthians to consider their calling and to remember that all that they are and all that they have is in Christ. In effect Paul's letter is one long plea: "Remember who you are!" When the church forgets who they are, the needs and desires of the individual come rushing in to fill the void. Identity amnesia leaves the church prone to all kinds of distortions and errors. The church is not a collection of individuals seeking their own unique path to the good life. Nor is the church comprised of consumers in need of weekly motivation or inspiration. The church is the blood-bought people of God who find life in Christ by the Spirit. Sadly, the church falls short of worshiping corporately in light of this identity.

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[31] John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 100.

[32] Davis offers an insightful overview of some of these religious and philosophical movements. See Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*, 25–32, 66–71. Several of these themes are traced throughout Johnson, *One with Christ*. Johnson ties a weak evangelical ecclesiology to an individualized soteriology, writing, "It is difficult to frame a rich account of the church around a soteriology dominated by forensic, extrinsic, and individualistic notions." Johnson, *One with Christ*, 191.

## Assessing the Conversation

Over recent decades, various theologians and pastors within American evangelicalism have sought to address the human-centered bent of the church's worship. Each identifies this same tendency and each seeks to provide an answer. For example, in 1980, Robert Rayburn produced *O Come, Let Us Worship* seeking to recover the centrality of the corporate worship of God in the Christian's life.[33] In 1984, Hughes Oliphant Old took a historical view by looking to the theology and practice of the Reformers and Puritans as they sought to recover the God-centered approach to worship seen in Scripture.[34] From the early 1990s until as recently as 2014, David Wells published a series of books that evaluated the human-centered problem made manifest in the church's adoption of secular culture and how this impacts one's understanding and practice of Christianity.[35] Many others have continued to contribute work in an effort to recover a God-centered framework for Christian worship, leading to a rich, albeit too often neglected, conversation encompassing biblical, theological, and historical approaches to the church's worship.[36] The various solutions exhibited by these voices

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[33] Rayburn writes, "All Christians must understand that the activity which is of primary importance in the life of every believer is true spiritual worship of God." Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (1980; repr., Wipf & Stock, 2010), 17.

[34] Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*, rev. ed. (1984; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

[35] David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-Love of God Reorients Our World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

[36] Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996); Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003); Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan, eds., *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003); Reggie M. Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*; Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*; Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God:*

evidence a tremendous amount of overlap, but each also presents unique ideas to guide the church's understanding and approach to worship. In order to assess the conversation, I highlight a few of the voices who identify particular problems and present salient solutions for the worshipping church: James B. Torrance, Michael Horton, Charles Lewis, and J. Todd Billings.[37] Each of these voices provides an important part of the foundation needed to move toward understanding the importance of union with Christ in corporate worship.

**James B. Torrance**

In his 1996 work *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* Scottish theologian James B. Torrance argued that the modern church's approach to worship fell into two broad camps. The first, and far more common, view holds that ultimately "worship is what *we* do before God."[38] Torrance argues that this approach to worship loses sight of the need for Jesus in corporate worship. He writes that this demonstrates an understanding of worship that says, "The only priesthood is our priesthood, the only offering our offering, the only intercessions our intercessions."[39] He describes this kind of corporate worship as unitarian, because it recognizes no need for Christ as mediator, and instead brings to the fore human activity.[40]

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*Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014); Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*.

[37] While there are other voices who bring similar critiques, such as Marva Dawn and Daniel Block, these four conversation partners are selected because of their diversity in tradition and in geography, representing a broad swath of Western evangelicalism. The late J. B. Torrance was a minister in the Church of Scotland. Michael Horton belongs to the United Reformed Churches in North America and resides in California. Chuck Lewis is a Southern Baptist minister from the Southeast United States, currently serving in Texas. J. Todd Billings hails from the Midwest and is a part of the Reformed Church in America.

[38] Torrance, *Worship, Community, Triune God*, 20.

[39] Torrance, *Worship, Community, Triune God*, 20.

[40] Torrance writes that the unitarian understanding of worship is primarily brought to bear on what he describes as "the existential, present-day experience model" in which "God gives himself to us in grace in the present moment of encounter, and we respond in faith, in repentance, and decision." Torrance, *Worship, Community and Triune God*, 26. Torrance goes on to say that the problem with this approach is

Torrance counters this unitarian view with a second view which he describes as Trinitarian. The Trinitarian view understands worship as "the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father."[41] This approach to worship takes seriously Christ's role as the church participates with him in his priesthood.[42] Jesus is not only the object of Christian worship but the one in whom this worship takes place. Torrance forcefully argues for recovering an understanding of worship centered on what Christ by the Spirit makes possible. The reason people lose sight of this is because they take their eyes off of Jesus. When a focus on Christ is lost, all that is left is self and one's own efforts.[43]

Torrance's work pushes the church in a direction where it must recognize Christ's role in corporate worship. Jesus Christ as the God-man is both the channel by which God gives grace to the church and the channel by which the church can approach God. Torrance writes, "Grace does not only mean that in the coming of Jesus Christ, God gives himself in holy love to humanity. It also means the coming of God as man, to do for us as a man what we cannot do for ourselves—to present us in himself through the eternal Spirit to the Father."[44] The response of the Christian to God takes place in response to what Christ has already done for him or her in response to the Father. Torrance argues

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that "it is still too anthropologically centered. Although it stresses the God-humanward movement in Christ, the human-Godward movement is still ours! It emphasizes *our* faith, *our* decision, *our* response in an event theology which short-circuits the vicarious humanity of Christ and belittles union with Christ" (29).

[41] Torrance, *Worship, Community, Triune God*, 20.

[42] Some have argued that Torrance takes Christ's priestly mediation too far. While commending his view of the ongoing and active ministry of Christ, Noel Due argues that Torrance's Christology incorrectly introduces the idea of Christ's "vicarious humanity," where the emphasis should be on his "vicarious sacrifice." Noel Due, *Created for Worship: From Genesis to Revelation to You* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2005), 163-65; see also Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 232-35.

[43] Torrance, *Worship, Community, Triune God*, 24.

[44] Torrance, *Worship, Community, Triune God*, 53.

that this is central to the epistle to the Hebrews. Jesus Christ is the worship leader for the church because in him they have forgiveness of sins and access to the presence of the Father.[45] "The church which takes her eyes off Jesus Christ, the only mediator of our worship," asserts Torrance, "is on the road to becoming apostate."[46] With his work, Torrance seeks to orient the church's understanding and approach to worship through a Trinitarian framework that cannot be grasped outside of Christ.

**Michael Horton**

In 2002, Michael Horton joined the conversation with his book *A Better Way*. He writes that the church should not "have to settle for either dull routine or perpetual innovation."[47] There is a better way. Horton expresses concern that "the deeper issues—the biblical and theological issues—underlying a distinctively Christian view of worship" are being neglected.[48] He fears that advocates on both sides of the traditional-contemporary debate end up losing sight of what is actually taking place in corporate worship. Situating his solution in a "sense of redemptive drama," Horton writes that this drama comes by the Word and Spirit.[49] God's people are transformed when they have a right conception of who God is, who they are in his presence, and what is taking place when they come into his presence. The better way of corporate worship is centered on

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[45] Torrance, *Worship, Community, Triune God*, 57.

[46] Torrance, *Worship, Community, Triune God*, 59.

[47] Horton, *A Better Way*, 10.

[48] Horton, *A Better Way*, 11.

[49] Horton, *A Better Way*, 13. Kevin Vanhoozer goes a step further than Horton by devoting a substantial monograph to developing a theory of doctrine centered on drama. But in line with Horton, Vanhoozer writes, "Christians go to church to build and to be built up into Christ. We go to church to rehearse, to celebrate, and to better understand the drama of redemption. We go out from church to serve the world, to play our part in the drama of redemption. The church is thus the theater wherein the world sees God's love played out time and time again." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 400.

God and his activity among his people.

Horton sets the stage by lamenting the replacement of "object-centered praise" with "subject-centered praise."[50] In the latter, God's character and work are ambiguously referenced, which leads the church to bring its own activity to a place of prominence. Horton writes, "Vagueness about the object of our praise inevitably leads to making our own praise the object. Praise therefore becomes an end in itself, and we are caught up in our own 'worship experience' rather than in the God whose character and acts are the only proper focus."[51] The character and action of the triune God must be front and center in the church's worship. When God is central, he defines both the object and means of Christian worship.[52] Horton goes on to argue that the church's worship belongs to a metanarrative according to a coming age and coming kingdom. The church's worship does not incorporate God into the narrative of the life of the church, but rather worship incorporates the church into God's metanarrative that encompasses all of creation over all of time. This incorporation in the church's worship can only take place in Christ.

**Charles Lewis**

As evidence of an approach to and practice of corporate worship that lacks a true sense of theocentrism, Charles Lewis conducted the Worship Design Project (WDP) in 2014. Like Torrance and Horton, Lewis locates the primary problem of corporate worship today in an anthropocentrism derived from a deficient view of God as the church gathers.[53] He frames his argument in terms of God's nearness and God's otherness and

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[50] Horton, *A Better Way*, 26.

[51] Horton, *A Better Way*, 26.

[52] Horton writes, "How we worship (the second commandment) is as much God's prerogative to define as whom we worship (the first commandment)." Horton, *A Better Way*, 29.

[53] Lewis asks, "Could it be that, in postmodern America, anthropocentrism has permeated Christian culture so much so that God has been displaced from his rightful position as the central figure in worship and instead replaced with created things?" Charles Thomas Lewis, "Far and Near: Christian Worship of the Transcendent and Immanent God of Wonders" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist

sets out to prove that churches have a strong tendency to prioritize immanence over transcendence. Lewis states why this issue is of consequence:

> When the immanence of God is prioritized in worship or embraced at the exclusion or diminution of transcendence, his grace ceases to be amazing, his mercy ceases to be tender, his faithfulness ceases to be mooring, his sovereignty ceases to be royal, his wrath ceases to induce fear, his perfection ceases to astonish, his abiding care is met with ever-decreasing gratitude, and his perfect provisions are met with an ever-increasing sense of entitlement.[54]

When God is no longer seen as transcendent, his gospel is no longer seen as glorious. Into the void left by a gospel robbed of its magnificence inevitably steps a focus on humanity.

In order to understand how the dynamics of immanence and transcendence take shape in corporate worship, Lewis constructed a closed-ended questionnaire survey called the Worship Design Project. His study focuses on Southern Baptist churches with reported attendance greater than 1,100 people each week. The stated purpose of the WDP is to "examine (1) how worship pastors select the elements to be included in their services of worship and (2) how worship pastors sequentially order the elements once they have been selected."[55] In addition to this dual examination, Lewis also seeks to understand how the concepts of transcendence and immanence play into the structure of a worship service.[56] In other words, the purpose of this research instrument is to understand the worship design practices of modern worship pastors and the philosophies and values that shape their planning.

Lewis finds that what others have asserted anecdotally proves to be true in the largest Southern Baptist congregations. The WDP shows that there is a consistent emphasis on God's immanence over his transcendence in both philosophy and planning

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Theological Seminary, 2015), 2.

[54] Lewis, "Far and Near," 9.

[55] Lewis, "Far and Near," 53.

[56] Lewis, "Far and Near," 17, 53–54.

of corporate worship services. Additionally, the otherness of God rarely functions as a category of emphasis in gathered worship. This evidences congregations which "show signs of indeed being influenced by the age of immanence and our cultural tendency to rush past the transcendence of God" in corporate worship.[57] Lewis's call to the church today is to begin with transcendence in their approach to corporate worship. God must be seen as divine Other before he can be embraced as immanent Savior.

**J. Todd Billings**

Most recently, J. Todd Billings has taken up similar arguments that return the church to a God-centered understanding and practice of corporate worship by focusing specifically on the practice of the Lord's Supper. In his 2018 work *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope* Billings argues that "a renewed theology and practice of the Lord's Supper can be an instrument for congregations to develop a deeper, more multifaceted sense of the gospel itself."[58] Billings argues that the church is plagued by a functional theology of the Lord's Supper marked by a "near-sighted vision," being reduced to mere remembrance.[59] This leads the church to miss out on the shaping and transforming that can take place through this Christ-instituted practice. Billings reasons that transformation is not only a matter of right doctrine, rather transformation takes place through symbols and stories.[60] The people of God must be shaped by the right symbols and become part of the right stories.

Building on the foundation of his previous work, Billings rightly goes one step further than others in connecting a renewed theology and practice of the Lord's Supper to

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[57] Lewis, "Far and Near," 115.

[58] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 1.

[59] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 16–17.

[60] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 28.

union with Christ.[61] Billings builds upon similar ideas to Horton in how people are incorporated into God's metanarrative; he writes, "God's script for our drama does not originate from within, but in the history of Jesus Christ—his life, death, and resurrection. That is *our* history, as ones who belong to Christ."[62] Remembrance, communion, and hope all take place through union with Christ, because from beginning to end this is where the life of the Christian is found. Identity for the Christian is not located in status or experience. It is not rooted in achievements or actions. The Christian's identity is wholly in Christ, and corporate worship becomes a means of reinforcing this reality. Billings writes that "at the Supper we enact our identity as children of the Father, feeding upon Jesus Christ by the Spirit, delighting in Christ and in fellowship with one another."[63]

While Billings's contribution to the conversation is life-giving and clarifying, his focus is limited to the Lord's Supper. There is a need to bring together these various strands in a way that keeps the whole of the corporate worship of the church in view. Both the thinking and practice of the local church—its theology and worship—need to be addressed with union with Christ in view. Union with Christ must be brought to bear on how the church understands and approaches its public worship.

## *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*: The Need for Establishing an Ontological Framework and Liturgical Practices

The Latin phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* is often cited in discussions that take place at the intersection of liturgy and theology.[64] The phrase originates from Prosper of

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[61] See Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*; Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

[62] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 115.

[63] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 202.

[64] For examples see Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*; Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life: A Systematic Theology* (1980; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 218–83; Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, 105–16; Gibson and Earngey,

Aquitaine, a disciple of Augustine of Hippo, around the middle of the fifth century.[65] Standing against the Pelagianism of his day, Prosper utilized the corporate prayers of the church in his defense, which he argued gave evidence that faith, from beginning to end, is all of grace. Prosper wrote, *legem credenda lex statuat supplicandi*, meaning, "the law of prayer may establish a law for belief." Prosper's point in this statement was that the way the church prays—the rule of prayer—may determine what the church should believe—the rule of belief.

While *lex orandi, lex credendi* takes on great import for Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians, Reformation Christians, with their firm commitment to *sola scriptura*, tend to emphasize the inverse of Prosper's phrase, rendering it *lex credendi, lex orandi*, or the law of belief establishes the law of prayer. This reflects the regulative principle of Reformed worship, where a church's liturgy is determined by what Scripture prescribes. Here, the Bible (and the doctrine set forth in its pages) determines how the church worships. For Christians in the Protestant tradition, doctrine must determine and regulate worship. But this begs a further question for Reformation Christians: if doctrine regulates worship, then what relationship does worship have to doctrine?

To gain perspective on the relationship between worship and doctrine, one must begin by looking at how the Bible addresses it. The existence of a relationship between worship and belief can be seen in Jesus's response to the Pharisees and scribes in Mark 7. In this scene, Jesus confronts a flawed idea that had shaped Jewish life. All of the Pharisaical regulations and prescriptions for cleansing led the Jews to believe that what corrupts each person is outside the body. In Mark 7:15, Jesus corrects the false

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*Reformation Worship*, 26–27; Dennis Okholm, *Learning Theology through the Church's Worship: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 19–20.

[65] Wainwright credits Karl Federer with providing insights into Prosper's authorship and influence; Wainwright, *Doxology*, 225n523; see also Karl Federer, *Liturgie und Glaube: eine theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Freiburg in der Schweiz: Paulus-Verlag, 1950).

doctrine by stating that it is "the things that come out of a person" that defile him. The ritual cleansing inculcated a false sense of sin, and consequently, salvation. Jeffrey Meyers comments on this scene, saying, "The laws that were spun out of the brains of the religious leaders of Israel, that had no grounding in the law of God, led to dangerous doctrinal misunderstandings—misconceptions that touched on the conception of man's fundamental problem before God."[66] The ceremonial practice of the Jews led to aberrant doctrine. Here Jesus demonstrates that how people worship influences what they believe.

Since the ministry of Jesus, and prior to the time of Prosper, the early church was regularly marked by those who utilized worship as influential to doctrine. Paul, in his letters to various churches, made it a regular practice to appeal to the worship of the church in support of doctrine as the Apostle highlights known confessions and hymns of the church (Phil 2:11-14; Col 1:15-17; Titus 3:4-7). One can trace similar examples in the writings of Cyprian, Tertullian, and Irenaeus.[67] Wainwright also highlights Augustine's use of the church's liturgy as proof for various doctrines.[68] These early church fathers were not developing the idea that the church's worship has an effect on the church's belief; rather, they were building upon a pattern developed in the pages of Scripture. Clearly, for those holding to *sola scriptura*, the idea of *lex orandi, lex credendi* must not be neglected.

The leaders of the Reformation, even in their advocacy of the principle of *sola scriptura* and their fight against the magisterium of the Roman Catholic church, viewed the relationship between worship and doctrine as significant. Jonathan Gibson and Mark

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[66] Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, 115.

[67] Wainwright, *Doxology*, 231–35.

[68] One example of Augustine's use of liturgical practice to defend doctrine was his argument that infant baptism and communion demonstrated the church acknowledging the reality of original sin. He asks, "Why have recourse to the remedy if the ailment is absent?" Augustine, *Sermon* 174, quoted in Wainwright, 227–28.

Earngey have compiled a near comprehensive survey of Reformation liturgies in order to demonstrate that recovering right worship was a key aspect of the Reformation.[69] Earngey writes, "Because the Reformers understood the important interplay between how worshipers pray (*lex orandi*) and how worshipers believe (*lex credendi*), they saw liturgy as a powerful means by which to communicate theology."[70] The key doctrines of the Reformation were not only taught through the writings of the Reformers, but were embodied in the liturgy in order to shape the doctrine of the church.

The correlation between worship and doctrine is far more complex than merely being a one-way relationship, whether understood as worship regulating doctrine or doctrine regulating worship.[71] The link is better understood, in the words of Meyers, "like a two-way street."[72] How the church worships influences the church's doctrine, and concurrently, what the church believes shapes how the church worships.

At the same time, it is important to note that for Christians in the evangelical tradition, holding to the authority of Scripture necessitates that worship not be placed on an equal level with doctrine. So, while both worship and doctrine exercise an influence on the other, doctrine maintains authority over worship.[73] Kevin Vanhoozer equates this

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[69] Gibson and Earngey write, "While the Reformers expended energy and time recovering and refining key doctrines . . . these doctrines in themselves were never the end goal. *Sola fide,* for example, may have been an immediate concern for the Magisterial Reformers, but *soli Deo gloria* was their ultimate concern. And because God's glory was their ultimate concern, *how* God was worshiped became a major concern." Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 49.

[70] Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 26.

[71] Okholm characterizes the two approaches as either "bottom-up," where one's perspective tends to be more ecclesiocentric—"that is, they hold that the church's beliefs arise out of the worship of the community"—or "top-down," where one's perspective is more theocentric, with an emphasis on "God's agency, initiative, and self-communication in the liturgy." Okholm, *Learning Theology through Church's Worship*, 20.

[72] Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, 115.

[73] Meyers makes a distinction between regulation and influence. Worship influences doctrine but it cannot regulate it; whereas doctrine must regulate the church's worship. Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, 107–13.

idea to contemporary drama theory. Does the essence of a play rest in the script or its performance? He writes, "Script and performance are equally necessary, though not equally authoritative. Biblical script without ecclesial performance is empty; ecclesial performance without biblical script is blind."[74] Vanhoozer's insight may be readily applied to doctrine and worship; both are necessary, but they do not hold the same weight or authority. For Reformation Christians, doctrine must be given life in the church's worship, and the church's worship must reinforce its doctrine.

Another way to state this argument is that the church needs both an ontological framework and liturgical practice to buttress its faith. Davis points to the church's need for "a new framework for perceiving reality itself—an 'ontological framework' so to speak—within which worship takes place."[75] A clearer conception of reality as the church gathers, rooted in knowing who God is, who the church itself is, and on what basis a relationship between the two becomes possible, is where this begins. The purpose of the first three chapters is to establish this ontological framework. With this ontological foundation in place, the church also needs liturgical practices that correspond to and further fortify the framework. This idea builds on much of the work of James K. A. Smith and his emphasis on the role of liturgical practices in shaping one's affections.[76] One's confessed truth must be an experienced truth in order to be truly and fully embraced. The second half of this dissertation seeks to address existing liturgical practices and how they might influence and reinforce doctrine.

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[74] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 362. Vanhoozer goes on to argue that Christian disciples needs a diet. He writes, "Two things stand in the way of our becoming physically or spiritually fit: a lack of knowledge (or knowing canceled by self-deception) and bad habits" (375). Knowledge equates to doctrine and habits to practices.

[75] Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*, 13.

[76] See in particular the works by James K. A. Smith: *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

Union with Christ provides a critical starting point in addressing both sides of the equation. On the one hand, union with Christ should shape the liturgical practices of the church. Because the church's identity is found in Christ, then this doctrine must regulate how the church worships. On the other hand, how the church worships should impact the church's grasp of this doctrine. The experienced truth of union with Christ in corporate worship should reinforce the confessed reality of one's standing in Christ even while the confessed reality of the church's union with Christ shapes and guides the church's understanding, approach, and practice of corporate worship.

## Conclusion

Billings begins his work on the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper by discussing the church's "functional theology" of salvation. He makes a distinction between what the church says they believe and what the church's practices say about what they actually believe. Billings writes that "the notion of 'functional theologies' . . . guide—often in a hidden way—the theologies expressed by our lives, even when they contrast with our 'stated theologies.'"[77] A functional theology puts on display the beliefs that are revealed in practices.

Sadly, a conception of corporate worship built upon the reality of union with Christ is a far cry from the functional theology of corporate worship that pervades contemporary evangelicalism. Rather than centering on God's revelation in Christ, the church's worship centers on human action and response and sees little need for an active and participating Mediator. It is predominantly unitarian and anthropocentric. It is unitarian to the extent that the church's worship does not effectively express a reliance

[77] Billings writes that a functional theology differs from a stated theology in that it is displayed, not in what a person says, but in "the patterns of a person's action." Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 7–8. Vanhoozer uses "performance" in a similar way to Billings in order to help readers understand how the church enacts what it professes to believe. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 361–62.

upon an intercessor to come to God in worship. It is anthropocentric in the sense that corporate worship is understood in terms of what the church can do before God. This dissertation aims to reframe the conversation about how the church should understand, approach, and practice corporate worship by centering it on the vital doctrine of union with Christ.

# CHAPTER 2

## THE ONTOLOGY OF CORPORATE WORSHIP: WORSHIPPING THE TRIUNE GOD IN CHRIST

How should the Christian understand and approach corporate worship? This question lies at the heart of the current discussion. The purpose of this work is rooted in the fundamental belief that there is a right way and a wrong way to approach God in worship. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes cautions: "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God" (Eccl 5:1). He grounds his call in the incomparable nature of God: "For God is in heaven and you are on earth" (Eccl 5:2). The particular approach of the present work does not aim to address worship in general but addresses it specifically within "the economy of the triune God's life-bestowing grace."[1] By understanding corporate worship in light of union with Christ, this work aims to relocate conversation on worship away from what the church does when it worships and instead frame one's understanding, approach, and practice of worship in light of the reality of God and his gospel. In order to do this, conversation must begin with God.

God is the starting point for all theological endeavors, including the development of a biblically faithful, historically-informed answer to the question of how Christians are to worship. In his summary of the Christian faith, the Swiss Reformer Johannes Wollebius argues that "the principle of the being of theology is God; the

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[1] This idea is articulated by Michael Allen, *Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017). He writes, "The present book addresses holiness from a particular angle, not by approaching holiness in general as some sort of phenomenological or cultural ideal or experience, but by reflecting upon holiness in the sphere of the gospel, that is, holiness in the wake of the economy of the triune God's life-bestowing grace" (21). My intent is to utilize Allen's approach, only substituting the word *worship* for *holiness*.

principle by which it is known is the word of God."[2] God is both the source and subject of all Christian study. As John Webster writes, "The being of God is not simply an hypothesis into which theology enquires, but rather is the reality which actively constitutes and delimits the field of theological activity."[3] As a branch of Christian theology, answering the question of right worship does not begin with practical know-how or innovative methods. These answers do not confine their focus to liturgical practices. Instead, all answers begin with God. In order to truly understand what the church is to do, one must begin with what the church is; and in order to ascertain what the church is, one must begin with who God is. Any attempt to understand corporate worship and its function in the Christian life must begin, like all other Christian endeavors, with God.

In his book *Naming the Elephant* James Sire highlights that all truly Christian thinking begins with ontology. It must start with what is ultimately real, with prime reality. Sire argues, "In the biblical worldview . . . everything is first and foremost determined by the nature and character of God. It cannot be said too strongly: *Ontology precedes epistemology*."[4] He contends that to invert this relationship is "devastating to the Christian worldview."[5] The proclivity to begin with questions of the function or purpose of corporate worship puts the church on a dangerous path, one that views human ability and capacity as primary over reality. Instead, if the church is to understand how

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[2] Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae christianae*, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. John W. Beardslee (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 30.

[3] John Webster, "Theological Theology," in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 25-26. Webster goes on to describe Wollebius's "principle of the being of theology" as its "intellectual ontology" (26). See also Michael Allen, "Knowledge of God," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 10–22.

[4] James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (2004; repr., Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 75.

[5] Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 75. Webster presents a similar argument in Webster, "Theological Theology," 2:11-31, writing specifically that "intellectual ontology has priority over anthropology and epistemology. Theology is simply not a free science" (26).

the people of God are to worship, they must first begin with identifying that which is ultimately real.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer makes a similar point in his 1933 lectures on Christology. He begins by making a distinction between *how* questions and *who* questions. *How* questions necessarily place the interlocutor at the center of the concern, whereas *who* questions take the person making inquiry beyond the limits of his or her existence by asking "Who are you?" Bonhoeffer writes, "It is only with reference to God that human beings know who they are."[6] Accordingly, Christian understanding about who people are and what they are to do must begin with God—God who is real. James Torrance says, "It is only as we know who God is and what he has done and is doing that we can find appropriate answers to the questions of how."[7] Any endeavor to understand corporate worship, like all other Christian thought, must begin with God, for this is where prime reality is found.

Yet sadly, God is seldom a central focus, let alone the starting point in conversation about Christian worship. A deficient view of God has been pervasive in the American evangelical church, and as A. W. Tozer once pointed out, an "erroneous or inadequate" view of God makes it "impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right."[8] This chapter aims to establish an ontological framework for corporate worship situated within the context of the gospel. This framework begins with

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[6] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12, *Berlin: 1932-1933*, ed. Larry Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 305. James Torrance comments, "[Bonhoeffer] pleaded for following the biblical pattern of giving priority to the question of who over what and how—that we interpret the atonement and personal faith in terms of the incarnation (the triune God of grace) and not the other way around. The pragmatic, problem-centered preoccupation with the question of how in our Western culture can so readily reduce the gospel to the category of means and ends." James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 28–29.

[7] Torrance, *Worship, Community and Triune God*, 71.

[8] A. W. Tozer, introduction to *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1961), viii.

understanding the triune God as he is: independent, good, and self-communicative. From there, the true identity of the church can be understood within the economy of the gospel. The source of the church's identity is in union with Christ within the context of the triune God. This chapter argues that the ontology of corporate worship is located in the nature of a triune God who chooses a defined people in Christ by the Spirit for the glory of his name.

## The Triune God: The Fundamental Reality for the Church's Corporate Worship

If God indeed is prime reality for the church, then one should expect to find God-awareness and God-centeredness characterizing the church's worship. Scripture attests, and the creeds of the church affirm, that there is one God who is three persons. For example, the Athanasian Creed of the sixth century emphatically states, "Now this is the catholic faith, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance. For the Father's person is one, the Son's another, the Holy Spirit's another; but the Godhead of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one, their glory is equal, their Majesty coeternal."[9] Scott Swain writes, "The doctrine of the Trinity is not simply one article among many within the Christian confession. It is the first and fundamental article of the faith, and the framework within which all other articles receive their meaning and import."[10] Given this doctrine's importance in the Christian faith, one would expect to look into any evangelical church and see a Trinitarian theology emanating through its songs, prayers, and preaching. While the church from its earliest days has proclaimed belief in a triune God, this great truth is

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[9] Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 132.

[10] Scott R. Swain, "Divine Trinity," in Allen and Swain, *Christian Dogmatics*, 78. John Feinberg succinctly defines this doctrine by stating, "God is one as to essence and three as to persons." John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton. IL: Crossway, 2006), 437.

all too often a forgotten reality having little bearing on practice.

Many theologians of the last several decades have observed this lack of Trinity-awareness. For example, Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, famously declared that if the Trinity was proved to be false then much of what exists as Christian literature could still remain unchanged.[11] Rahner remarks, "It is as though this mystery has been revealed for its own sake, and that even after it has been made known to us, it remains, as a reality, locked up within itself. We make statements about it, but as a reality it has nothing to do with us at all."[12] Robert Letham concurs and his assessment is that "today most Western Christians are practical modalists."[13] This functional doctrine of God tends to deprive the Divine of his glory in the mystery and mind-stretching reality of his existence. John Jefferson Davis succinctly summarizes the problem evident in many churches today: "Your 'God' is too 'light'; your vision of the church is too low; your view of your self is too high, and consequently, your worship is too shallow."[14] Without an accurately articulated view of God, the people of God lose their distinctiveness and purpose. If God is abandoned as the center of the church's worship, the church eventually abandons its mission in the world. Michael Quicke remarks, "We are witnesses to the incredible shrinking God."[15]

Nowhere is the collective neglect of a clear conception of God as triune more apparent than in the church's song. Lester Ruth has consistently demonstrated the Trinity-forgetfulness that marks the evangelical hymnody and the contemporary worship

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[11] Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (1970; repr., New York: Crossroad, 1997), 10–11.

[12] Rahner, *The Trinity*, 14.

[13] Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004), 5.

[14] John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 38.

[15] Michael J. Quicke, *Preaching as Worship: An Integrative Approach to Formation in Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 43.

movement. Recently, Ruth examined the lyrics of 200 American evangelical hymns and the 112 most popular contemporary worship songs and found that only four percent of the songs named Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and only one song explicitly praises God for being triune.[16] Ruth emphasizes the importance of worshiping the triune God: "If we lose the Trinity, if we have worship that is less than true to God, we end up with a very different faith, a very different hope of salvation, and, ultimately, a very different God than the one revealed in Scripture."[17]

The church needs to recover a conception of worship rooted in the reality of the triune God.[18] "Eviscerated or thin background theories of the real," writes Davis, "will produce thin or eviscerated expressions of worship."[19] Without a thick conception of reality, the assembling of God's people becomes a social club gathered together for a shared experience. Reorientation to reality in worship begins with looking to and centering on God. Allen Ross writes that "any definition of Christian worship must be formulated within the framework of the Trinitarian nature of the faith. Our worship must be God-centered."[20] While there are a multitude of aspects related to the nature of God that could be discussed, this section endeavors to recover God-centeredness in corporate

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[16] The 200 hymns Ruth evaluated were taken from Stephen Marini's work in which he identified the most printed hymns from 1737 to 1960. For the contemporary worship songs, Ruth utilized the twice-a-year top 25 lists from Christian Copyright Licensing International to determine the songs most frequently sung between 1989 and 2015. Lester Ruth, "Some Similarities and Differences between Historic Evangelical Hymns and Contemporary Worship Songs," *Artistic Theologian* 3 (2015): 68–70.

[17] Lester Ruth, "'How Great Is Our God': The Trinity in Contemporary Christian Worship Music," in *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise and Worship*, ed. Robert Woods and Brian Walrath (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 32.

[18] David Taylor presents a similar argument, albeit with a different application: "I argue here that a right understanding of corporate worship, and the role that the arts might play in this aspect of the church's life, begins with a clear understanding of the role of the Trinity in worship." W. David O. Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation: Worship and the Formative Power of the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 23.

[19] Davis, *Worship and Reality of God*, 86.

[20] Allen Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 66.

worship by locating the starting point of Christian worship in God as independent, good, and self-communicative. I focus on these three aspects of the essence of the triune God because of their particular relevance to Christian worship, their neglect in contemporary practice, and of the way other attributes of God can be generally categorized under these headings.

**The Independent God**

God is entirely independent in his own nature. God, because he exists eternally as the Trinity, has no need for anyone or anything. This is where our conception of Christian worship rightly begins. Because the triune God is independent, he has no need for humanity. He is self-existent and self-sufficient in every way. Herman Bavinck writes, "God is independent in everything: in his existence, in his perfections, in his decrees, and in his works."[21] Theologians often describe this reality by using the term *aseity* stemming from the phrase *a se*, Latin for "from himself." God has no beginning and no cause. God has no needs and no constraints. Tertullian describes God as "the great Supreme existing in eternity, unbegotten, unmade without beginning, without end."[22]

The doctrine of aseity was not construed by human minds but is made readily apparent in the way that God reveals himself in the pages of Scripture: "In the beginning God created . . . ." (Gen 1:1). The Bible does not begin with God's beginning. When the biblical narrative begins, God already is. Moses declares, "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps 90:2). When God reveals his name to Moses in Exodus

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[21] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 152.

[22] Tertullian, *The Five Books against Marcion*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 1.3.

3:14, he calls himself "I Am."[23] Webster says that divine aseity "indicates the glory and plenitude of the life of the Holy Trinity in its self-existent and self-moving originality, its underived fullness. In every respect, God is of himself God."[24] The triune God is entirely complete in his self-existence.

Psalm 50 attests to the reality that God does not need anything and highlights the significance this has for humanity's worship. God does not need anything from his creatures because he already owns all things. The psalmist writes, "I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills." He continues, "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine" (Ps 50:9-10, 12). The God of the universe has no need for sacrifice or ritual, much less a dead cow. In his sermon to the Athenians, Paul attests to the reality of God's self-sufficient existence by saying, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:24-25). God exists as God prior to all else and independent of all else. Because God is one, God in three persons, he has no need of human relationships or human worship.

Before there was time, God is. Before life was breathed into existence, God is. Before water flowed on the face of the earth, before stars shone in the cosmos, God is. Before the foundations of the earth were laid, God is. But God was not a lonely deity longing for companionship. God—the preexistent, independent God—was and is triune: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Three in person, but one in essence.

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[23] English Puritan Stephen Charnock describes the truth conveyed in God's name by saying, "*I am* that in every moment which I was, and will be in all moments of time. Nothing can be added to me, nothing can be detracted from me." Stephen Charnock, *The Works of Stephen Charnock* (1864; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), 1:355.

[24] John Webster, "Life in and of Himself," in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *God and the Works of God* (New York: T & T Clark, 2016), 13.

And in the glory of the triune God he enjoyed complete and full self-satisfying fellowship. Michael Reeves writes, "Before he ever created, before he ever ruled the world, before anything else, this God was a Father loving his Son."[25] The triune God, three-in-one, exists in eternity in self-fulfilling fellowship. Webster makes this point by stressing the life that is contained in God: "It is much more fruitful to understand aseity in terms of fullness of personal relations. Aseity is *life*: God's life *from* and therefore *in* himself. This life is the relations of Father, Son and Spirit."[26] While individuals must look for meaning and purpose outside of their own humanity, God is entirely unlike humankind. Richard Lints writes that it is "God's permanence as 'three persons in eternal communion with each other' [that] grounds his independence from human personhood."[27] The reality of the triune God as the preexistent and self-satisfied deity is foundational for the church's corporate worship.

**The Good God**

Why would God relate to anyone or anything if he is independent? As has been stated, God, as the blessed Trinity, has no need for anyone or anything, being wholly sufficient within himself. Yet because he is triune, God saw fit for the life, communion, and love within the three persons of the Godhead to pour forth in creation. The triune God graciously gives life from himself on the basis of his intrinsic goodness. The triune God is the good God. As Jesus testifies in John 5:26, "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself." John Calvin comments on

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[25] Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 21.

[26] Webster, "Life in and of Himself," 19. Charnock makes a similar point in the seventeenth century: "[H]e hath an unlimited life; not a drop of life, but a fountain; not a spark of a limited life, but a life transcending all bounds. He hath life in himself." Charnock, *Works*, 1:356.

[27] Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 29.

this verse, "The words mean that God did not want to have life hidden and as it were buried with Himself, and therefore He transfused it into His Son that it might flow to us."[28] Reeves writes, "If, before all things, God was eternally a Father, then this God is an inherently outgoing, life-giving God."[29] While God is an independent God, because of his triune nature as Father, Son, and Spirit, he is good.

It is out of the overflow of the eternal fellowship among the life-containing and life-bestowing Trinity that God creates humanity to be in relationship with him. God says, "Let us make man according to our image" (Gen 1:26). John of Damascus encapsulates this idea when he says, "Since, then, God, who is good and more than good, did not find satisfaction in contemplation, but in his exceeding goodness wished certain things to come into existence which would enjoy his benefits and share in his goodness, he brought all things out of nothing into being and created them."[30] The blessed Trinity is an overflowing fountain of goodness. In God's creation of humanity, his goodness is displayed in an outpouring of the love and relationship existing eternally within the Trinity.[31] The reality of the triune God as the independent One in relationship with himself is fundamental in the church's corporate worship. Were it not for the goodness of God flowing out of the fellowship and mutual glorification witnessed in the Trinity, there would be no possibility for true worship of God.

**The Self-Communicative God**

The independent and good triune God graciously communicates himself to

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[28] John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 1-10*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 4 (1961; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 131.

[29] Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 24.

[30] John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace (1899; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 9:2.2.

[31] For additional discussion on this point see Kelly M. Kapic and Justin L. Borger, *The God Who Gives: How the Trinity Shapes the Christian Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018).

humanity. Because of God's relational existence in himself and the fountain that overflows in his gracious self-revelation—the declaration of who he is—humanity has the opportunity to know God. The triune God is the self-communicative God. It is his self-communication through the Word by the Spirit that makes knowledge and worship of God possible.[32] Calvin discusses God's accommodation to humanity, writing, "As nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us."[33] God reveals himself in terms that humanity can comprehend. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the incarnation. God in his grace proclaimed himself through the divine *Logos*. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word was with God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14). It was the Word's dwelling among his creation that enables humanity to know God, and God's revelation is not possible apart from his triune nature.

But God's self-revelation does not end with the historical life of Jesus. His communication continues today as his Word animates the worship of the church. At every point in the church's worship God is acting, speaking, impressing his nature and character upon his people. David Taylor remarks, "Before human beings do anything with the arts in worship, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are doing things that make such faithful worship possible."[34] Often the church can view its worship as an intellectual or therapeutic opportunity, where Christians participate in corporate worship in order to learn more about God or to feel better about their lives as their faith is strengthened.[35]

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[32] Commenting on Wollebius's assertion that "the principle of the being of theology is God; the principle by which it is known is the Word of God," Webster writes that God's Word is the "noetic principle of theology." Webster, "Theological Theology," 26. He goes on to say that "in a very important sense, the notion of the Word of God . . . shows how it is that knowledge of God is possible and real" (26).

[33] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (1960; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1.13.1.

[34] Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 24.

[35] Discussing the problems of this approach, Jamie Smith writes, "Worship is not *for me*—it's not primarily meant to be an experience that 'meets my felt needs,' nor should we reduce it to merely a

While both the former and latter can take place in corporate worship, neither constitutes true worship. True worship takes place when God discloses himself to his people. Lutheran theologian Jim Bushur explains, "True worship . . . is not an imparting of knowledge about God but the revelation of God himself. We do not enter worship as the actors who investigate and discover facts about God. Rather, God is the actor who reveals himself to us."[36] In corporate worship the triune God purposes to reveal himself to his people out of his abundant grace. Fred Sanders says that this is "the matrix of Trinitarian theology" that leads to "wonder, love, and praise that God has done for us and our salvation something that manifests and enacts what he is in himself."[37] Accordingly, "Christian worship, in all its forms, should be understood as the self-communication of the triune God."[38] When the church gathers to worship, the triune God is continuously present and working. Christian worship is situated in the context of the independent and good triune God, where the Father, Son, and Spirit are communicating, active, and engaged.

## The Church of God: The Identity of the Church in Corporate Worship

The task of developing an ontological framework for corporate worship began by looking to the nature of the triune God, and now turns to the nature of the church. It begins with God because he is the prime reality for the church at all times in every situation.[39] The church receives the triune God on his own terms, according to his own

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pedagogy of desire (which would be just a more sophisticated *pro me* construal of worship); rather, worship is about and for God." James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 70.

[36] James Bushur, "Worship: The Activity of the Trinity," *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 3, no. 3 (July 1994): 4.

[37] Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 27.

[38] Edward J. Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1988), 180.

[39] John Calvin contends, "Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first

revelation, in order to discern the way forward in relation to any other matter. God reveals himself as independent in who he is and what he does and intrinsically relational as the Being in communion with himself. This God is the primary subject, object, and participant in the church's corporate worship. Jean-Jacques von Allmen expounds this reality: "God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is . . . He who serves and is served by the cult, He who commands and He who welcomes the service, He who speaks and He who listens, He whom we implore, and He who grants our requests."[40] If God is the starting point and center of Christian worship, what then is the identity of those gathered together to worship?

When seeking to understand the identity of the church in corporate worship various approaches could be utilized. In his work on the doctrine of the church, *Sojourners and Strangers*, Gregg Allison highlights three basic approaches to ecclesiology.[41] The first approach is *functional* where "one seeks to define and discuss the church in terms of its activities, roles, or ministries."[42] Here understanding of the church stems from what it does. The second approach is *teleological*. In this approach understanding of the church is driven by its purpose or goal. The approach Allison advocates is *ontological* whereby the church is understood "in terms of its attributes or characteristics."[43] Allison ultimately agrees with Simon Chan, who writes that the church's "basic identity is to be found not in what it *does* but in what it *is*."[44]

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looked upon God's face." Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.2.

[40] Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press), 184.

[41] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 50–53.

[42] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 50.

[43] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 51.

[44] Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 23. Chan locates the identity of the church in relationship to creation: "The church precedes creation in that it is what God has in view from all eternity and creation is the means by

Sadly, the church has a collective propensity to fail to remember what it is. The words of the hymnwriter Robert Robinson ring true: believers are "prone to wander." They are apt to forget what God has made them and saved them to be. But this collective plight does not end with identity amnesia. When conversation turns to recalling identity, often the answers provided come from the wrong places. Many look for understanding through the visible activity of the church when faced with the question, "What is the church?" Chan describes this as an "instrumentalist view" of the church. He writes, "If the church is essentially instrumental, then its basic identity can be expressed in terms of its functions: what it must do to fulfill God's larger purpose."[45] When an instrumentalist view of the church is embraced, then the relationship between worship and the nature of the church is inverted. Rather than the church's life being expressed in worship, the church's life is instead constituted by worship. In order to worship God rightly, a clearer conception of identity is required. With God as the foundation, the ontological framework of corporate worship will continue to be assembled by (1) discerning the importance of identity to a discussion of worship, (2) defining the nature of the church, (3) establishing the context for the church's identity, and (4) addressing the source of the church's identity.

**Identity and Worship**

Why is identity important in developing an ontological framework for corporate worship? The very first page of Scripture begins to reveal the answer. Genesis

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which God fulfills his eternal purpose in time. The church does not exist in order to fix a broken creation; rather, creation exists to realize the church" (23). This leads Chan to describe the church as a "divine-humanity" and "expressed in the concept of Mother Church" (23-24). While Allison explicitly disagrees with how Chan characterizes the "instrumentalist notion of the church" and does not follow him in describing the church as a "divine-humanity" or in utilizing the conception of "Mother Church," Allison explicitly affirms the priority of an ontological approach to ecclesiology grounded, not so much in its "relation to creation" but more broadly in its nature—"its identity, its characteristics." Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 52-53.

[45] Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 21.

1:27 records, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." The reality that all of humanity has been made in God's image orients the church's worship away from itself and toward God. Being made in God's image is a complex and weighty concept, but one that must be understood in order to worship God rightly. While seemingly countless pages have been written exploring the meaning of being made in the image of God, four pivotal observations are essential in establishing an ontological framework for corporate worship.

In the first place, being made in the image of God highlights the starting point for human identity: all people are creatures. Humanity is comprised of those who are made by God—"It is he who made us" (Ps 100:3; cf. Ps 139:13-16; Isa 29:16). Webster writes that "creatures have their being in such a way that both in coming-to-be and in continuance they are marked by entire ontological deficiency apart from the person and act of the creator in his infinite charity."[46] To be *made* in the image of God must be understood as an act of the "infinite charity" of the triune God.

Second, being made in the image of God denotes the most fundamental thing about human identity, namely, that its identity is found outside of itself. Anna Williams notes, "One of the definitive features of Christian anthropology is that it declines to define humanity in solely human terms."[47] In other words, human identity is not found by looking inward, but in looking outward. People can only understand who they are by looking outside of themselves. Michael Allen argues that many of the approaches to understanding what it means to be made in God's image that have dominated Christian thinking center on similarity (i.e., in how humans are similar to God), looking to humanity's spiritual, moral, functional, or relational capacity to clarify the meaning of

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[46] John Webster, "*Non Ex Aequo*: God's Relation to Creatures," in *God and Works of God*, 121.

[47] A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.

being God's image-bearers.[48] But being made in God's image signifies difference prior to highlighting any similarity. Allen notes, "Being named the image of God suggests that the most interesting thing about any of us humans is, strictly speaking, outside of us."[49] People do not realize their true identity until they look beyond themselves.

The third necessary observation regarding being made in God's image is that human identity is then grounded in reflection.[50] To be an image is to be a representation of something outside of oneself. Lints writes, "Humans may be said to have a reflective identity. In some sense they find meaning outside themselves by virtue of what they reflect."[51] Humanity "stands in need of explanation by reference to an external principle," according to Webster.[52] By definition, an image does not bear the same ontological weight of the object it reflects. Allen contends, "A replica is, first and foremost, not an original."[53] The deeper reality is the object being reflected. Like a mirror, humans are not significant until they present a reflection of another object. Humanity, as image-bearers, should never see living out their own self-determined identity as the end for which they are designed because their identity is fundamentally reflective.

The fourth observation follows: because identity is found by looking outward to what humanity reflects, the object humanity reflects is determinative for how humans live. In the words of G. K. Beale, "What people revere, they resemble, either for ruin or

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[48] Allen provides a helpful overview of these four approaches. He concludes by offering two similarities between all four: (1) "they all . . . identify one facet of human existence as the way we image God"; and (2) "each identif[ies] the image of God as a term that bespeaks similarity between humanity and God." Allen, *Sanctification*, 79–82. For a helpful overview or errors in understanding what it means to be made in God's image, see John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 37–51.

[49] Allen, *Sanctification*, 84.

[50] Lints writes, "Human identity is rooted in what it reflects." Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 30.

[51] Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 29.

[52] Webster, "*Non Ex Aequo*," 122.

[53] Allen, *Sanctification*, 82.

restoration."[54] The object of one's worship establishes his or her significance and becomes what molds one's identity. God has created humanity to image himself. As reflections of that which rests outside of a person, like an image that is dependent on another object for its identity, one's identity is "contingent upon God for [his or her] identity."[55] The reality of being made in the image of God is critical in order to grasp why identity is so important to how the church understands and practices corporate worship.

**The Nature of the Church**

Since a firm grasp of identity is critical for Christian worship, I must next answer the question, "Who has God saved his people to be?" Stated another way, "What is the nature of the church?" Answering this question finally reveals the importance of union with Christ to corporate worship. Who the church is has everything to do with how the church worships. The four preceding observations on what it means to be made in God's image are pertinent, not only to the identity of individuals as worshippers, but also to the church's identity as a worshipping community. While being made in God's image demonstrates that humanity does not have a claim on its identity, so also being chosen by God shows that the church does not have authority over its identity. God does. He is Creator of all and he is Lord of the church. Calvin eloquently states why this truth matters to the church's worship:

> We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly

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[54] G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 16. This statement functions as a condensed thesis of Beale's work and is repeated throughout the book.

[55] Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 29.

strive toward him as our only lawful goal.[56]

Because the church is not its own, since its identity is reflective and found outside of itself, then believers must give themselves to God as they live for his glory.

The nature of the church, succinctly stated, is the people who belong to God.[57] And the people of God are not just any people. John Frame highlights that the people who make up the church are "the people in covenant with God through Jesus Christ."[58] Webster writes that "the basis for the church's being is the very simple and entirely unfathomable divine declaration: 'I am the Lord your God.'"[59] This gracious pronouncement of God is realized as a people are chosen and set apart for fellowship with God through Jesus Christ by the Spirit. Mark Dever includes this fuller understanding of the people of God in his definition of the church: "The church is the body of people called by God's grace through faith in Christ to glorify him together by serving him in his world."[60] Ultimately, the nature of the church cannot be rightly conceived apart from who it is as those chosen in Christ.

The Bible speaks of the church using various images to describe its reality. The

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[56] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.1.

[57] Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck writes, "The characteristic essence of the church lies in the fact that it is the people of God." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 298. Grudem defines the church as "the community of all true believers for all time." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 853. Edmund Clowney does not so much provide a succinct definition of the church but instead simply says that "the church is defined by belonging to God." Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 29. Similar to Grudem, John Frame defines the church as "the people of God in all ages." John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 1019.

[58] Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1019.

[59] John Webster, "On Evangelical Ecclesiology," in *Confessing God*, 167.

[60] Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 3. Allison writes, "The church is the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit." Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29.

church is referred to as the temple of the living God (1 Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:21-22; 1 Pet 2:5), the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27; Eph 5:23; Col 1:18), the bride of Christ (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:32; Rev 19:7, 21:2), and the branches with Jesus as the vine (John 15:5). These four images, while significant, only begin to describe how Scripture speaks of the church's identity. In his work *Images of the Church in the New Testament* Paul Minear concludes that the Bible uses as many as ninety-six different images for the church.[61] Given the sheer number of images used, one might expect to find a convoluted picture of the church emerge that is exceedingly difficult to comprehend. To the contrary, Minear argues that the images all point "toward a perception of the character of the church that agrees, to an amazing degree, with the perceptions produced by other images."[62] The various images for the church used in the Bible point to a singular reality and a singular truth.

Like humanity being made in the image of God, the identity of the church is not found by looking inside the church, but outside of itself to the triune God.[63] The images used for the church in the New Testament all point to an identity found beyond the church itself. This identity is located in relationship to Christ, which is made a reality by the Spirit. The church cannot comprehend its identity apart from union with Christ; accordingly, each image used for the church in the New Testament finds its source or orientation in Christ. The church cannot be what God made it to be apart from Christ. Christ is the vine in which the church abides and from which the church bears fruit (John 15:1-5). Christ is the cornerstone on which the church is built and by which it is "joined

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[61] Paul Sevier Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (1960; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 28, 268–69.

[62] Minear, *Images of the Church*, 26.

[63] Minear writes, "The church does not have a nature that can be readily defined simply by looking, no matter how directly, at the church itself. Its life springs from, is nourished by, and is oriented toward the fullness of glory of the Triune God." Minear, *Images of the Church*, 12.

together and grows into a holy temple" (Eph 2:20-22). Christ is the head of the body into which the whole body grows and is joined together (Eph 4:15-16). Christ is the bridegroom from which the church receives sacrificial love and for which the church is being prepared (Eph 5:25-27). Amidst the great diversity of images of the church provided in the New Testament, they point to an existence whose significance is found amidst a far more profound reality. Minear writes that "image after image points beyond itself to a realm in which God and Jesus Christ and the Spirit are at work."[64] In the context of this trinitarian realm the church locates the source of its identity in Christ.

**The Trinity: The Context of the Church's Identity**

The context for the church's identity is distinctively trinitarian. Out of the perfection of the triune God, he purposes to be in relationship with his people. It is important to begin here so as to maintain the "relation-in-distinction" that is necessary for "covenant fellowship" between God and his creatures.[65] In his essay, "On Evangelical Ecclesiology," Webster prioritizes the perfection of God and the subsequent electing grace of God in understanding the church. God, the perfect One, has no lack and no need for anyone or anything. Webster describes this perfection as

> the repleteness of his life, the fullness or completeness of his being, the entirety with which he is himself. As the perfect one, God is utterly realized, lacks nothing, and is devoid of no element of his own blessedness. From all eternity he is wholly and unceasingly fulfilled. . . . 'Perfection' is a more comprehensive concept [than infinity or sovereignty], indicating the full majesty in which God is who he is.[66]

But while God is perfect, Webster argues that "his perfection includes a movement outwards, a turning to that which is not God, as its lordly creator, reconciler and

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[64] Minear, *Images of the Church*, 223.

[65] Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 166.

[66] Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 157.

consummator."[67] This movement comes out of "the eternally mobile repose of the Holy Trinity" and is a movement of holy love and grace involving Father, Son, and Spirit.[68] In this act of grace, which provides the context for the church's identity as he establishes covenant fellowship with his people, God acts alone.[69]

The church's identity can only be understood within the context of the triune God. Allison describes how the existence of the church "is due to the triune God and his salvific work through Jesus Christ the Son and in the Holy Spirit."[70] At the conclusion of his farewell discourse, Jesus comes to God the Father in prayer. Jesus's prayer is that God's people may be one. He prays, "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one" (John 17:22-23). Marcus Johnson comments, "Jesus is declaring that in our union with him we participate in the most sacred assembly of persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. This means that the church is the most sacred assembly of persons in the entire creation, by reason of our participation in the triune persons."[71] When believers are united to Christ, they receive the gift of fellowship with the triune God.

The context for Christian identity understood corporately can be found only in the God who is triune. The atmosphere of Christian worship takes place within the grace-infusing, love-overflowing context of Trinity. In order to substantiate this claim, the

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[67] Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 166.

[68] Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 167.

[69] Webster writes, "The work of reconciliation is triune. It has its deep ground in the eternal purpose of the Father, who wills creatures for fellowship. This purpose is established by the Son, against all creaturely defiance and in mercy upon creaturely distress, overcoming alienation and reconciling us to God. The office of the Holy Spirit is then to apply to creatures the benefits of salvation, in the sense of making actual in creaturely time and space that for which creatures have been reconciled—fellowship with God and with one another." Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 180.

[70] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 103–4.

[71] Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 210.

church's worship must be understood as covenantal. Reeves writes, "Through the giving of the Spirit, God shares with us—and catches us up into—the life that is his."[72] The love that emanates within the triune God overflows in creation providing the basis for the relationship between believers, God, and one another.[73] Consequently, as Letham observes, echoing Acts 17:28, "We live, move, and have our being in a pervasively Trinitarian atmosphere."[74] Each of the persons of the Godhead is present and active in unique ways as the church gathers. J. Todd Billings writes, "The Trinity is the context for Christian identity—an embodied identity *enacted* through prayer."[75] Because God is triune, three-in-one, humanity worships God. Torrance's definition of worship reflects the distinctiveness of the Trinitarian reality of the church's worship. He writes, "Worship is . . . the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father."[76] True worship of God does not exist apart from the fact that God is triune. Accordingly, the context for the church's identity and worship rests in the triune nature of God.

**Union with Christ: The Source of the Church's Identity**

Within the context of the triune God, the church finds the source of its identity in union with Christ. The church cannot be what God made it to be apart from being united to Christ. "The story of human history, from beginning to end," writes Jonathan Gibson, "is the story of worship. This is because God has so structured his world that

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[72] Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 94.

[73] For extensive discussion on this topic see Michael Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); and Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

[74] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 8.

[75] J. Todd Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 24.

[76] Torrance, *Worship, Community, and Triune God*, 20.

every person will worship through one of two men—Adam or Jesus Christ."[77] Those found in Adam receive his activity as their representative and his death or life based on his sin or obedience; however, those united to Christ receive his perfect obedience and eternal life (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:22). Union with Christ encompasses realities for the Christian that are both static and dynamic, vertical and horizontal. Being "in Christ" is the foremost description of the believer.[78] This union "defines our very being," according to Vanhoozer, and is determinative for the church's identity and existence.[79]

There is no other way by which one can have salvation but through participation with Christ by the Spirit. The Apostle John writes to the church, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). True life can only be found and only be realized in being united to Christ. Letham states that this union is a reality that "far surpasses the ability of human language to describe it."[80] It is "an exceedingly broad topic,"[81] which encompasses every activity of God in believers' lives, from election before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:3-4) to glorification (Col 3:4; 1 Thess 4:16-17). But how is this union to be understood? Where does this union take place? When does it take place? How does it take place?

**The basis of union with Christ.** The basis for the union between God and

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[77] Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey, *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 20.

[78] James Dunn cites 83 occurrences of "in Christ" and an additional 47 occurrences of "in the Lord," all contained in Paul's thirteen letters alone. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 396–97.

[79] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 394.

[80] Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2011), 1.

[81] Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 914.

humanity is covenantal.[82] God purposes to bind himself to humans predicated on certain conditions being met. This union is made possible through the person and work of Jesus Christ. In his work *Union with Christ in the New Testament* Grant Macaskill highlights the covenantal relationship between God and his people, which provides the foundation for an understanding of representation where the story of God's people is represented in Jesus. It is through the indwelling Spirit that God's people identify with Christ and participate in his story.[83] Central to this idea is the New Testament image of the temple. Macaskill says that the temple imagery used in reference to the people of God serves to point to God's presence both in and with his people.[84] It is in union with Christ that the believer can have a relationship with God through his representative headship.[85]

Understanding the basis of union with Christ within the framework of covenant maintains the "relation-in-distinction" highlighted by Webster. In this covenant God does for humanity what he requires of them in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Central to that work is justification, which Horton describes as "the forensic basis of union with Christ and . . . therefore the source of our calling, sanctification, and glorification."[86] Justification is God's declaration "not on the basis of an existing condition, but on that of a gracious imputation—a declaration which is not in harmony with the existing condition of the sinner."[87] The covenant of grace that makes union with Christ possible rests not in human activity or mediation, but in the work of Christ alone.

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[82] Horton provides an extended argument for the covenantal nature of union with Christ in Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*.

[83] Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

[84] Macaskill, *Union in the New Testament*, 172–91.

[85] Macaskill, *Union in the New Testament*, 298.

[86] Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, 129.

[87] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1938; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 452.

**The scope of union with Christ.** With covenant as its basis, the doctrine of union with Christ has been described by John Murray as "the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation."[88] Vanhoozer uses the idea of "the *simplicity* of union," where "union is to soteriology what the doctrine of divine simplicity is to theology proper. . . . Just as God is one, so salvation is simple."[89] The scope of union with Christ captures the entirety of soteriology, with the breadth of this union extending from former to future days. In the past, the people of God have been chosen in Christ, redeemed by the blood of Jesus (Eph 1:3-4, 7). Believers have died with him (Col 3:3), have been raised with him (1 Cor 15:22; Eph 2:6), and have been exalted with him (Eph 2:6). In the present, the people of God receive new life in Christ (Rom 6:4; Eph 2:10) and are being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). In the future believers will die in Christ (1 Thess 4:14, 16), and be glorified in Christ (Rom 8:17).

Sinclair Ferguson describes union with Christ as taking place in what he designates as "three 'moments': the eternal, the incarnational, and the existential."[90] It is important to note that this framework does not represent multiple unions but different aspects of the believer's union with Christ. The eternal moment highlights being chosen in Christ and that this union "transcends our own personal existence and stretches back

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[88] John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (1955; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 171.

[89] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From 'Blessed in Christ' to 'Being in Christ,'" in *"In Christ" in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation*, ed. Michael J. Thate, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Constantine R. Campbell (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 10. Gaffin writes, "There is but one union, with distinguishable but inseparable, coexisting legal and renovative aspects." Richard B. Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 43. Horton says that "the theme of union with Christ brings together the temporal tenses of our salvation—past, present, and future, as well as the objective and subjective, historical and existential, corporate and individual, forensic and transformative, and a unilateral gift that establishes reciprocal relationship of faithful speaking and answering within the covenant as the nucleus of cosmic renewal." Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, 131.

[90] Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 109-10. Cf. Gaffin who uses the terms "predestinarian," "past redemptive-historical," and "present" or "existential." Richard Gaffin, "The Work of Christ Applied," in Allen and Swain, *Christian Dogmatics*, 281.

into the plan and purpose of God in eternity" (Eph 1:3-4, 11-12).[91] The incarnational aspect of union speaks to the import of Christ's work in space and time to become man and accomplish obedience and righteousness as a substitute for sinful humanity, becoming the Mediator between God and man through his work on the cross. Finally, and particularly prescient to this dissertation, the existential moment of union with Christ brings to the believer the present reality of all the blessings that are in Christ through Spirit-worked faith, which then "determines the whole of life."[92] It is in this remarkable union to Jesus Christ that the dead receive life, the hopeless find hope, and the sinner obtains salvation, both now and forever.[93] Maintaining logical distinction between these three moments of union with Christ allows one to plunge deeper into the present nature of this union.

**The nature of union with Christ.** Richard Gaffin highlights various aspects of the believer's present union with Christ, notably that union with Christ is spiritual, vital, and indissoluble.[94] First, union with Christ is a spiritual union. This union is not spiritual in the sense that it is immaterial, but that it is brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit.[95] Ferguson writes that "the work of the Spirit is essentially a ministry of

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[91] Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 109.

[92] Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 110.

[93] Billings beautifully states this idea: "While we could not save ourselves, while we were utterly dead and helpless to attain salvation, God united us to Jesus Christ, the one in whom we have life (Rom 5:8). The power of God's salvific action in uniting us to Christ is connected to the utter powerlessness of sinners to save themselves." Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 36.

[94] Gaffin, "Work of Christ Applied," 281–83.

[95] Gaffin writes that "as spiritual, it is neither ontological, like that between the persons of the Trinity; nor hypostatic or unipersonal, like that between Christ's two natures; nor psychosomatic, like that between body and soul in human personality; nor somatic, like that between husband and wife; nor merely intellectual and moral, a unity in understanding, affections, and purpose." Gaffin, "Work of Christ Applied," 282.

uniting us to Christ, and then unfolding to us and in us the riches of God's grace which we inherit in Christ."[96] During the farewell discourse recorded in John's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that the Helper, the Holy Spirit, will dwell with and be in them (John 14:17). It is through the Spirit that Christ makes himself present with his people. Scripture attests to the fact that union takes place through the bond of the Spirit (Rom 8:9-11; 1 Cor 6:17, 12:13; 1 John 3:24, 4:13).

This union takes place through the life-giving indwelling of the Spirit, rendering union with Christ vital. It is "the law of the Spirit of life" that sets captives "free in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:2). By this spiritual union then "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). The vital nature of this union can be seen in Jesus's words recorded throughout the gospel of John. Johnson summarizes:

> Christ is the source of our life and activity as a vine is to its branches, so that apart from him, we can do nothing (John 15); he is our sustenance as living bread and water (John 4 and 6); he is our resurrection and life (John 11); and he is our eternal life in his own being (John 5).[97]

Finally, union with Christ is indissoluble. Because it finds its basis in the immutable God who elects a people for his own glory, nothing can render this union void. "The salvation eternally purposed for believers 'in Christ,'" writes Gaffin, "is infallibly certain of reaching its eschatological consummation in their future resurrection-glorification 'in Christ.'"[98] This union cannot be dissolved. It is permanent and eternal in Christ.

**The language of union with Christ.** Reflecting on the nature of union with Christ leads to an important question: are believers in Christ or is Christ in believers?

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[96] Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 112.

[97] Johnson, *One with Christ*, 48.

[98] Gaffin, "Work of Christ Applied," 282–83.

Anthony Hoekema details how Scripture uses both of these dynamics in speaking of the Christian's union with Christ.[99] In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul describes reality for the believer: the Christian is in Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (see John 15:4, 5, 7; 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 12:2; Gal 3:28; Eph 1:4, 2:10; Phil 3:9; 1 Thess 4:16; 1 John 4:13). The second way Scripture speaks of union with Christ is that Christ is in the Christian. Paul declares in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (see Rom 8:10; 2 Cor 13:5; Eph 3:17; Col 1:27). Hoekema also highlights at least three passages in John's writing where the idea that Christ is in believers is combined with the idea that they are in Christ (see John 6:56, 15:4; 1 John 4:13). Hoekema writes, "When we are in Christ, Christ is also in us. Our living in him and his living in us are as inseparable as finger and thumb."[100] But is *union* the best term for understanding the relationship between Christ and the Christian?

In his work *Paul and Union with Christ* Constantine Campbell examines the Pauline corpus and analyzes his "dazzling and perplexing" usage of union with Christ that permeates seemingly every page of Paul's writings.[101] Taking an exegetical-theological approach by probing each of Paul's prepositional uses in relation to Christ, Campbell seeks to understand what Paul means by union with Christ, and what role it has in his theology. His analysis yields the conclusion that *union* does not sufficiently grasp all that Paul means by speaking of being "in Christ."[102] Paul's utilization of this phrase is "an idiomatic expression with flexible usage."[103] The primary failing of the word *union* is

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[99] Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (1989; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 54–55.

[100] Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 55.

[101] Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 21.

[102] Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 29.

[103] Campbell writes that Paul's use of the phrase "in Christ" is "strictly speaking . . . a

that it is static. Campbell explains, "It reflects a spiritual reality but is not able to convey more dynamic notions."[104] *Union* connotes a more rigid concept than the active emphasis of a passage such as Romans 6:8, where Paul writes that believers have both "died with Christ," and that they "will also live with Him" (cf. Col 2:20, 3:3).[105] It also fails to clearly articulate the significance of being "baptized into Christ" (Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27), or the Christian's new relationship with Christ as they "grow in every way into Him" (Eph 4:15).[106] While *union* is a valuable term, Campbell argues that it is insufficient in articulating all that Paul means when he speaks of the Christian's relationship with Christ.

Instead, Campbell concludes with four terms that provide an umbrella which covers "the full spectrum of Pauline language, ideas, and themes" contained in the idea of union with Christ.[107] The terms Campbell highlights are union, participation, identification, and incorporation.[108] Union speaks to the static location of the Christian's place with Christ. Participation underlines the dynamic nature of life in Christ. Identification highlights the Christian's belonging with Christ. Incorporation emphasizes the horizontal nature of the Christian's relationship to Christ—when a believer belongs to Christ they necessarily belong to the people of Christ. These four terms—union, participation, identification, and incorporation—provide rich depth and vibrant color to the concept of union with Christ.

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prepositional phrase, and there is no reason not to label it such. Paul's fondness of the phrase, however, suggests that it might also be described as an *idiom*. Its frequency indicates that it is not an accidental combination of preposition and proper name, and yet it does not convey a fixed meaning every time it occurs. *Idiom* usefully captures these nuances." Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 26.

[104] Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 413.

[105] Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 220–21.

[106] Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 207–8, 211.

[107] Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 413.

[108] Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 29, 406–14.

It is Campbell's final two terms, identification and incorporation, that highlight the centrality of union with Christ in the church's identity. Vanhoozer argues, "If being in Christ means being part of his body, then it follows that union with Christ will always be corporate in nature."[109] To be one with Christ is to be one with his people. Scripture attests to the reality that the source of Christian identity is never found by looking within, but is instead found in looking to Christ as head of the body, cornerstone of the temple, husband to the bride, vine to the branches. What the church is—its ontological identity—is fundamental to its understanding and approach to corporate worship. It is in "the theater of the gospel" that those in and of Christ assemble "for the enactment of salvation, the lived performance of/participation in the drama of redemption."[110] Essential to this acting out is the identity of the church, which finds its source in union with Christ. This blessed union enables the possibility of the church's corporate worship.

## Union with Christ and the Possibility of Corporate Worship

Critical to developing an ontological framework for corporate worship is the recognition that it is the church's union with Christ which makes true worship possible. Apart from God's covenanting with his people in Christ by the Spirit, worship is impossible. It is in Christ that the people of God enjoy communion with God. Letham writes, "Our communion with the Trinity rests on the union we have with Jesus Christ."[111] When the church gathers in worship, it has no basis for initiating anything before God, but what has already been initiated in Christ. John Owen writes, "Our communion with God consisteth in his *communication of himself unto us, with our*

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[109] Vanhoozer, "From 'Blessed' to 'Being,'" 20.

[110] Vanhoozer, "From 'Blessed' to 'Being,'" 28. For further discussion of this topic see Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*; Horton, *People and Place*.

[111] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 43.

*returnal unto him* of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that *union* which in Jesus Christ we have with him."[112] This is what the writer of Hebrews describes. God never desired sacrifices and offerings, but he provides all that he requires in Christ (Heb 10:5-7). The church's worship is possible because before all else it is a gift received in Christ and it is carried out in an ongoing way through Christ's intercession before God.

Understanding the possibility of corporate worship through union with Christ sheds an illuminating light on how the church conceives of liturgy. The word *liturgy* derives from the Greek words λειτος (public) and εργον (work). Λειτουργια is a public work. This etymology raises the question, "Is this a public work *for* the people or *by* the people?" Modern conceptions of liturgy stress the latter.[113] Liturgy becomes the public work done *by* the church. But Paul Marshall convincingly argues that this is etymologically incorrect.[114] In the first-century Greek world, λειτουργια was a work done on *behalf* of the people, never *by* the people.[115] Every New Testament instance of this word speaks of the work of ministry done for the sake of others (see Rom 13:6, 15:16;

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[112] John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (1850; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 2:8–9.

[113] Wainwright describes the rise of the liturgical movement throughout the twentieth century and states that one of its primary principles is that "worship is 'the work of the people.'" Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Periods of Liturgical History," in *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones et al. (1978; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 66.

[114] Paul V. Marshall, "Reconsidering 'Liturgical Theology': Is there a Lex Orandi for All Christians?" *Studia Liturgica* 25, no. 2 (September 1, 1995): 129–50.

[115] Robert Taft writes, "The original sense of the word λειτουργια—public service—does not imply a community activity, in spite of what is often said. Individuals performed public services for, or in the name of the community, and these were called 'liturgies.'" Robert Taft, *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1984), 161. John Klentos writes, "Before becoming a religious term, λειτουργια was used to refer to any kind of public service from producing a dramatic performance to tax paying to military service at one's own expense to garbage collection." John Klentos, "Liturgical Perspectives on the Laity," in *One Calling in Christ: The Laity in the Orthodox Church*, ed. Anton C. Vrame (Berkeley, CA: InterOrthodox Press, 2005), 107, quoted in Michael B. Aune, "Liturgy and Theology: Rethinking the Relationship, pt. 1, Setting the Stage," *Worship* 81, no. 1 (January 2007): 62.

Phil 2:25; Heb 1:7, 8:2). This is why Hebrews 8:2 describes Jesus as the church's λειτουργος. Peter Brunner writes, "*Leiturgia* is the eternal sacerdotal service performed by the Crucified, exalted to the right hand of God as the Liturgist of the true heavenly sanctuary."[116] In corporate worship, the church enters first into a work done on its behalf in Jesus Christ. This gift to believers in Jesus Christ makes possible four realities in corporate worship: God's presence and action, and the church's acceptance and purpose.

**God's Presence**

In Christ, when the church gathers in worship, God is there.[117] The words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 18:20 state, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." In the life of the church this reality never ceases to be true. In God's plan "in bringing many sons to glory," he sent Jesus to be made like man so that man could be made like him (Heb 2:10). In order to join God's family, Jesus Christ became part of the human family. Now, because believers have been incorporated into Christ, when the church gathers God is there. Hebrews 2:12 cites Jesus declaring that he is singing God's praise "in the midst of the congregation." Christ's presence gives the church a voice and a song. What makes Christian worship remarkable is not what the church gathers to do, but the fact that God is present. The congregation does not have to "conjure his presence," writes Reggie Kidd.[118] He continues, "He is Lord of life and Master of all being; it so happens that it is his utter pleasure to gather his people and orchestrate their praise to the Father."[119] Ultimately, as Davis writes, "The real presence of God as the fundamental fact of worship makes the assembly a special place and a

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[116] Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans. Martin H. Bertram (1968; repr., St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 15.

[117] This theme is further discussed in chap. 4 of this dissertation.

[118] Reggie M. Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 116.

[119] Kidd, *With One Voice*, 117.

special time because the real God is really there."[120]

**God's Action**

Not only is God present when the church gathers, God is active in Christ.[121] Because God is present he determines to act among his people—to "orchestrate their praise."[122] Lutheran theologian Norman Nagel writes, "With Jesus and the message that he fulfilled—the whole of the Scriptures—comes all that he brings with him and bestows."[123] God bestows his love on his people in Christ through the channel of the Spirit. Owen writes that "the Father communicates no issue of his love unto us but through Christ."[124] Owen calls the Christian to "sit down a little at the fountain, and you will quickly have a farther discovery of the sweetness of the streams."[125] Kelly Kapic, echoing Owen, writes, "Like a fountain overflowing with water, or the clouds so full that they must pour forth rain, so the Father's love flows 'out of its own fullness.'"[126] God's presence is not a passive presence. Rather, when the church gathers in Christ God is active in its midst.

**The Church's Acceptance**

In addition to God's presence and activity, union with Christ makes the church's worship acceptable before God. The worship of the church is not driven by a need to prove its worth before God. The worship of the church is already accepted by

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[120] Davis, *Worship and Reality of God*, 34.

[121] Chap. 4 of this dissertation addresses this topic in greater detail.

[122] Kidd, *With One Voice*, 117.

[123] Norman E. Nagel, "Whose Liturgy Is It?" *Logia* 2, no. 2 (April 1993): 4–8.

[124] Owen, *Works*, 2:27.

[125] Owen, *Works*, 2:36.

[126] Kelly M. Kapic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 173.

God in Christ. The church is a pilgrim people coming together not in its own name but in the name of Jesus, being identified with Christ. Torrance details this reality: "God has already provided for us that response which alone is acceptable to him—the offering made for the whole human race in the life, obedience and passion of Jesus Christ."[127] Jesus Christ is the church's λειτουργια. He is the true agent of worship. When the church is united to Christ all that it does is acceptable before God. Torrance states elsewhere, "God does not accept us because we have offered worthy worship. In his love, he accepts us freely in the person of his beloved Son. It is he who in our name and on our behalf, in our humanity, has made the one offering to the Father which alone is acceptable to God for all humanity, for all nations, for all times."[128] The only offering believers bring to God is the offering that has been brought through Christ. Union with Christ makes the church's worship acceptable before God.

**The Church's Purpose**

The church of God must know why it gathers when it gathers. Any engagement of questions related to corporate worship must first answer the question, "Why does the church assemble to worship?" When the church gathers in corporate worship, God is present and active, the church is accepted in Christ, and the church has purpose in Christ. Rather than doing nothing in response to their acceptance before God in Christ, it is precisely because believers are in Christ that their worship is then fueled with divine significance. Billings writes, "Our preaching and sacraments, and our prayers and Scripture readings, participate in the Spirit's work of mediating Christ's powerful presence among his people."[129] In corporate worship the church has the opportunity to

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[127] Torrance, *Worship, Community, and Triune God*, 29.

[128] Torrance, *Worship, Community, and Triune God*, 23.

[129] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 26.

put on display who it is as the people of God chosen in Christ.

Corporate worship in the life of the church is the enactment of its identity: the redeemed people of God gather together in Christ by the Spirit in praise of God. Worship gives physical form to who they already are in Christ. Within the field of liturgical theology this has been expounded often. Schmemann describes the aim of the Orthodox liturgy (the ordo) by saying, "The purpose of the liturgical ordo is to make worship the expression of the faith of the Church, to actualize the Church herself."[130] Schmemann uses the language of actualization to express the idea that in corporate worship the church gives evidence of its true reality.

This idea of worship being the enactment of the church's identity is not unique to Schmemann or the Orthodox tradition. Jean-Jacques von Allmen, the Swiss Reformed theologian, articulates a similar idea, borrowing a phrase from Brunner, by speaking of the church's worship as the "epiphany of the church."[131] He says that three things take place in corporate worship: "By its worship the Church becomes itself, becomes conscious of itself, and confesses itself as a distinctive entity. Worship thus allows the Church to emerge in its true nature."[132] The true nature of the church is one that worships God. Worship is by no means the only expression of the nature of the church or the only reason for the existence of the church. It is not the only way the church actualizes itself, but it is especially in the worship of the church that its nature and purpose becomes evident. Nicholas Wolterstorff comments, "When the church assembles for communal worship, she does what she was called into existence to do. The church exists to worship

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[130] Schmemann, *Liturgical Theology*, 139–40.

[131] For von Allmen's discussion of this idea see Jean-Jacques von Allmen, "The Cult as the Epiphany of the Church," in von Allmen, *Worship*, 42-55. Brunner describes corporate worship as "the assembly of the Christian congregation in the name of Jesus"; he continues, "In such an assembly the epiphany of the church takes place." Brunner, *Worship in Name of Jesus*, 18–19.

[132] von Allmen, *Worship*, 42.

God in Christ. It is in this sense that, in enacting the liturgy, she actualizes herself; and in actualizing herself, she manifests herself."[133]

One must exercise caution when discussing the corporate worship of the church in terms of actualizing itself. Like von Allmen stresses, I am arguing that corporate worship manifests the nature of the church. But this argument is distinct from saying that the definition of the church is found in what it does rather than in who it is. Edmund Clowney cautions against the theological pitfalls of ecumenical ecclesiology that gained prominence through much of the twentieth century: "The church had been defined as becoming rather than *being*; it was not a company of the redeemed, but a ministry of redemption."[134] The argument in this popular movement became that "the church exists in *act*, in becoming, not in being."[135] The existence of the church—its very nature—is not located in activity and ministry. Rather, its nature is found in who God has made and saved it to be in Christ by the Spirit. This is not to negate its activity or nature, but to protect the church from inverting its action in worship with the activity of God in establishing and building his church as it worships.

While worship is a pivotal activity of the church, prior to and concurrent with the church's action, God is the divine actor. Wolterstorff cautions, "We run the risk of serious distortion if we do not, in the same breath that we say that the church actualizes and manifests herself in the liturgy, also say that God acts in the liturgy."[136] Corporate worship is God's arena of activity before it is the church's. When the emphasis is on the latter action then the church runs the risk of eclipsing God. Michael Aune articulates a

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[133] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 11.

[134] Clowney, *The Church*, 18.

[135] Clowney, *The Church*, 18.

[136] Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 12. God's action is the focus of chap. 4 of this dissertation.

danger of this thinking: "To shift the emphasis toward 'church' and/or 'assembly' can leave one vulnerable or susceptible to a different kind of theology where God no longer appears to be the initiator of the action of worship."[137] Rather than giving meaning to the church, worship functions to position the church to receive from God and to give evidence to who it already is in Christ.

When the church gathers in corporate worship it comes to give evidence of what it is in reality and this reality is found in Christ. Schmemann writes, "Christian worship, by its nature, structure and content, is the revelation and realization by the Church of her own real nature. And this nature is the new life in Christ—union in Christ with God the Holy Spirit, knowledge of the Truth, unity, love, grace, peace, salvation."[138] Worship as "epiphany" and "actualization" means that the church gathers, not primarily for the purpose of shared experience or nourishment, but for attesting to and giving evidence of its defining reality, its true nature in Christ.[139] Corporate worship provides the church with the opportunity to give doxological expression to who it already is as the people of God in Christ and to who it one day will be, glorified in Christ.

## Conclusion

Prior to making any forays into understanding human activity in corporate worship, one must begin with a reorientation to reality. Union with Christ "gives a portrait of Christian identity that displaces the ever-fascinating self, replacing it with a

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[137] Michael B. Aune, "Liturgy and Theology: Rethinking the Relationship, pt. 2, A Different Starting Place," *Worship* 81, no. 2 (March 2007): 156. In pt. 1 of his essay Aune writes, "When the ecclesiological dimension and dynamic of worship are emphasized too much, this can lead to the loss of this event's christocentricity along with an accompanying cosmic and eschatological vision that has the capacity to transcend much of modern culture's subjectivism and individualism." Aune, "Liturgy and Theology, pt.1," 64.

[138] Schmemann, *Liturgical Theology*, 29.

[139] Schmemann writes that worship should be understood as the church's "self-evidencing," not "the bestowal of a spiritual experience, spiritual food." Schmemann, *Liturgical Theology*, 31.

God-given identity received from the Father through the Spirit in Christ."[140] When the worship of the church is approached through the lens of who it is in Christ, a new depth of understanding and greater clarity in practice is attained. When believers avert their eyes from who they are in Christ their worship becomes a matter of their activity, their offering, their sacrifice. In the words of Torrance, "We fall back on our 'religion.'"[141] He continues, "It is by grace alone, through the gift of Jesus Christ in the Spirit that we can enter into and live a life of communion with God our Father."[142] Jesus Christ is the only mediator of Christian worship. The appropriate ontological framework for the church's worship centers on union with Christ.

There is a true ontological framework anchored in the reality of God and who the church is in Christ, and there are other lesser frameworks often built on function, experience, or purpose. The world presents ontological frameworks contrary to what the Bible provides. The church is incessantly called to that which is not truly real, eternal, or significant. Davis writes, "Unless we recognize these alien ontologies and counter them with a biblical background theory of the real, we may miss God on Sunday morning, and real worship in 'Spirit and in truth' will probably not take place."[143] For the people of God, corporate worship functions as that which offers a counter-narrative, the alternative story, the truer reality. The church gathers to be reoriented to reality; to be reminded of the triune God in his power and glory; to receive from him, to participate with him, and anticipate the final coming of his kingdom, all of which takes place in Christ. Union with Christ is fundamental to a biblical ontological framework for corporate worship.

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[140] Billings, *Union with Christ*, 2.

[141] Torrance, *Worship, Community, and Triune God*, 59.

[142] Torrance, *Worship, Community, and Triune God*, 59.

[143] Davis, *Worship and Reality of God*, 14.

# CHAPTER 3

## THE IMPORTANCE OF UNION WITH CHRIST IN JOHN CALVIN'S UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

The argument set forth in this dissertation is that the doctrine of the believer's union with Christ should inform and shape the church's understanding and practice of corporate worship. In other words, the church's grasp of the reality of being "in Christ" will frame its approach to and practice of corporate worship. As already discussed, the doctrine of union with Christ regrettably tends to recede into the background of ecclesial life. This neglect can lead to ambiguity surrounding the purpose and function of worship. In order to regain the importance of this doctrine in the church's worship, the church needs both theological clarity about union with Christ, as well as practices that reinforce this truth. To advance my argument, I turn next to John Calvin and the theological framework that shaped his understanding and practice of corporate worship, in order to bring historical perspective to my thesis.

By focusing on Calvin, this chapter demonstrates how reconnecting proper belief to healthy practice invigorates Christian worship through the doctrine of union with Christ. Looking to the history of the church can provide a compelling example for the church to follow today. Bela Bartok, the Hungarian composer, once remarked, "Only a fool will build in defiance of the past. What is new and significant always must be grafted to old roots."[1] The Protestant Reformation, of which Calvin was a part, was not a new tree planted in a new land; it was a movement that grew out of its context.[2] The leaders of

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[1] Bela Bartok, quoted in epigraph to Basil Spence, *Phoenix at Coventry: The Building of a Cathedral* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), xvii.

[2] Muller describes how developments in Reformation studies have shown that the

the Protestant Reformation, men such as Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and Calvin, did not "build in defiance of the past," but gave themselves to understanding the past in order to strengthen the church's present and future. They scoured the church's history to find those who stood as "faithful witnesses to the authority of Scripture."[3] The Reformers understood that their story was one that began *in media res*. What brought reformation to the church was not an ignorance of what had come before, nor did the Reformers blindly accept all that they inherited. Bartok describes the need for "a slow and delicate process . . . to distinguish radical vitality from the wastes of mere survival."[4] The Reformers went through a process of looking to the Word of God and the history of the church in order to discern good from bad, wise from foolish, God's purpose from human invention. The church's task is the same today.[5] In order to achieve progress for the church, defined as ever-increasing fidelity to God, his Word, and his mission in the

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"Reformation itself, once described as an almost hermetically sealed theological box, is now understood in the context of broader cultural patterns extending back into the Middle Ages and forward into the early modern era." Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 14. He continues, "Individual Protestant theologians are now understood not as creators of an entirely new and radically biblical theology but as fairly conservative Reformers whose immediate theological roots are to be found in the theological milieu of the later Middle Ages and whose positive sources included the greater part of the older tradition of the church" (14). Similarly, Gavin Ortlund writes, "Protestant theology should not be, and ultimately cannot be, abstracted from the broader tradition that preceded it." Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 43.

[3] Hughes Oliphant Old describes how the Reformers drew from the examples provided in various fathers of the early church: "The Reformers learned from Athanasius about Christian psalmody, from Ambrose about catechetical instruction, from John Chrysostom about preaching, and from Augustine about the sacraments." Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture* (1984; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 4. For a more robust treatment on patristic influence on Reformed worship, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1970).

[4] Bartok, epigraph to Spence, *Phoenix at Coventry*, xvii.

[5] Similar arguments have been presented recently in Daniel H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); Kenneth J. Stewart, *In Search of Ancient Roots: The Christian Past and the Evangelical Identity Crisis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017); Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval*.

world, then one must understand the vital and life-giving aspects for flourishing required by Scripture and made manifest in the church's history.

One of the life-giving aspects of theology that needs to be turned to again and again is union with Christ. This is one of the most fundamental doctrines for the life of the church, but an urgent need exists to retrieve the practical importance of this doctrine in the church's worship.[6] This chapter demonstrates that Calvin's understanding of the church's worship flowed from his broader theological vision, which holds union with Christ in a prominent place. In order to do this, I begin with a brief biographical sketch before turning to the place of union with Christ in his theology, followed by his doctrine of corporate worship. I argue that, for Calvin, the importance of union with Christ in salvation leads to a doctrine of the church's worship centered on experiencing God's gracious activity, expressing gratitude for his benevolence received through Christ, and encouraging believers to look to Jesus and the life found in him as their hope in every circumstance.

## Brief Biography of John Calvin

The relationship between Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ and his understanding of the church's worship is best comprehended within the context of his own story and the tumultuous world in which it takes place.[7] The onset of the sixteenth

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[6] Speaking of union with Christ, Gaffin writes, "As a fair generalization, Reformed theology has certainly continued to have an appreciation of this doctrine, but at times has lost sight of its centrality and its full biblical dimensions." Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Union with Christ: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections," in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A. T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 271.

[7] I am indebted to the following fuller treatments of Calvin's life, each of which uniquely contributes to a better understanding of Calvin. Parker spends comparatively more time than previous biographers on Calvin's days as a student, also emphasizing his commentaries and preaching, in T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (1975; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). Selderhuis makes a point to let Calvin himself speak through his personal correspondence in Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009); and Gordon provides the most recent and comprehensive look at its subject in F. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (2009; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

century brought with it a whirlwind of change. T. H. L. Parker describes how "the introduction of gunpowder revolutionized war and the printing press threw open the doors of knowledge . . . sea-discoverers went to new worlds," and these developments led to massive shifts in "the structure of the church, the state, and society itself."[8] Into this radically changing world, John Calvin was born in Noyon, France, on July 10, 1509. Around the age of fourteen, he was sent off to Paris by his father in order to study for the priesthood, but for reasons that continue to escape understanding, within a few years, Calvin's course changed and he left Paris to study law, arriving in Orléans in 1528 and then Bourges in 1529.[9]

During the ensuing years, Calvin immersed himself in his studies, becoming a master in classical, legal, and biblical works. Theodore Beza relates that Calvin's "custom was, after supping very frugally, to continue his studies until midnight, and on getting up in the morning, to spend some time meditating, and, as it were, digesting what he had read in bed."[10] His intense study and the relationships that he developed in this season evidently led to what Wilhelm Neuser describes as "a decisive shift in Calvin's thinking."[11] This change was marked by a trend toward humanism and theology.

In 1531, Calvin moved back to Paris to continue his humanist studies and began publishing some of his work. Initially, his focus was on the classics,[12] but sometime in 1533 his focus shifted because, as Calvin relays, "God by a sudden

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[8] Parker, *John Calvin*, 9–10.

[9] Gordon writes, "Calvin's shift from theology to law in the late 1520s has long confounded historians, largely because he has left almost no clues as to why and when it took place." Gordon, *Calvin*, 18.

[10] Theodore Beza, "Life of John Calvin," in *Tracts and Letters of John Calvin*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1844; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), xxiii.

[11] Wilhelm H. Neuser, "France and Basel," in *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, trans. Judith J. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 24.

[12] Calvin's first scholarly work was a commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*, published in 1532. Gordon, *Calvin*, 22–29.

conversion subdued and brought to a teachable frame my mind. . . . I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardor."[13] Then, after an eruption of persecution emerged in Paris in late 1534, Calvin fled for Basel and devoted himself to theological study.[14] Calvin later described that while he was seeking safety and obscurity in Basel, "many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France" by those in opposition to church reform; and so he concluded "unless I opposed them to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery."[15] His opposition took the form of writing a summary of the Christian faith according to the Word of God. This work was published in 1536 under the name *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and was addressed to the king of France.[16] According to Parker, in the *Institutes* Calvin "had not only given genuine dogmatic form to the cardinal doctrines of the Reformation: he had moulded those doctrines into one of the classic presentations of the Christian faith."[17]

When Calvin eventually departed Basel in 1536, he set his sights on Strasbourg as a place he might peacefully devote himself to study and writing. His journey necessitated passing through the Swiss city of Geneva, and while there, Calvin was brought out from his desired anonymity by Guillaume Farel, "who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel," and then implored Calvin to stay and work for

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[13] John Calvin, "Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms," in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee, trans. James Anderson (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 59.

[14] Parker, *John Calvin*, 51–52; Gordon, *Calvin*, 40–62.

[15] Calvin, "Preface to Commentary on Psalms," 60.

[16] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (1960; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

[17] Parker, *John Calvin*, 72.

reform.[18] Calvin describes the situation with Farel:

> After having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken.[19]

However, Calvin's work with Farel in Geneva was short-lived and they were soon forced to leave the city due to conflict and opposition that arose there.[20]

After a brief time in Bern, Calvin came to Strasbourg, a city in which the Protestant church had been firmly established, where he "resolved to live in a private station, free from the burden and cares of any public charge."[21] His hopes were thwarted by Martin Bucer, who entreated him to teach theology and pastor a congregation of French refugees in the city.[22] Calvin stayed in Strasbourg for three fruitful years, where he particularly enjoyed pastoring as well as his relationship with Bucer.[23] It was this season and this relationship that shaped his understanding of the church's worship. His own admission was that Bucer exercised considerable influence over him, describing

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[18] Calvin, "Preface to Commentary on Psalms," 61.

[19] Calvin, "Preface to Commentary on Psalms," 61.

[20] Beza quotes Calvin's faith-filled response to this trial: "Certainly, had I been the servant of men I had obtained a poor reward, but it is well that I have served Him who never fails to perform to his servants whatever he has promised." John Calvin, quoted in Beza, "Life of John Calvin," xxx–xxxiii.

[21] Calvin, "Preface to Commentary on Psalms," 62.

[22] Beza, "Life of John Calvin," xxxiii–xxxiv; Parker, *John Calvin*, 91–97. Ironically, Bucer employed the same means as Farel in convincing Calvin to come to his city. Calvin himself describes Farel as "detain[ing] me at Geneva, not so much by counsel and exhortation, as by a dreadful imprecation, which I felt to be as if God had from heaven laid His mighty hand upon me to arrest me." Calvin, "Preface to Commentary on Psalms," 61–62. Calvin then describes Bucer as "employing a similar kind of remonstrance and protestation as that to which Farel had recourse before." Calvin, "Preface to Commentary on Psalms," 61–62. Bucer used the example of Jonah as he beckoned Calvin to come to Strasbourg.

[23] Parker describes Calvin's time in Strasbourg as "if not halcyon days after the storm, at least a time of comparative calm, of reflection, of constructive pastoral work, of writing of the highest quality." Parker, *John Calvin*, 91–92. He goes on to write that pastoring the French congregation in this city was "a happy situation for him; a Frenchman among Frenchmen, a refugee among refugees" (92).

Bucer as "that man of holy memory, outstanding doctor in the church of God,"[24] and "that most excellent servant of Christ."[25] These three years in Strasbourg played a pivotal role in the theological development of the French Reformer.[26]

Calvin became a citizen of Strasbourg on July 29, 1539. Despite his intention to remain there, the leaders in Geneva beckoned him to return. He was initially entirely disinclined, but after much resistance, Calvin relented and came back to Geneva in 1541.[27] So desperate was the church for pastoral leadership that the city's invitation to Calvin provided him the opportunity to negotiate the conditions of his return, allowing him to establish biblical grounds for governance and order in the church.[28] He spent the rest of his days laboring in Geneva through his preaching, shepherding, and governing of the church there, writing extensively, composing sermons, letters, commentaries, tracts, and revising his *Institutes* four times.[29] In Geneva, Calvin faithfully served the church

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[24] John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 2 (1972; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 1.xiv.

[25] Calvin, "Preface to Commentary on Psalms," 62.

[26] Gordon contends that this time "changed Calvin," and were it not for this season "he could well have become yet another forgotten figure of the sixteenth century." Gordon, *Calvin*, 85–86.

[27] Calvin wrote to Farel in March of 1540 at the invitation to return to Geneva that "rather would I submit to death a hundred times than to that cross, on which one had to perish daily a thousand times over." John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters of John Calvin* (1844; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 4:175, 211–12, 218. Several months later, on October 27, Calvin described God's favor to him in bringing him to Strasbourg away from the "gulf and whirlpool" of Geneva, which was "dangerous and destructive" to him, for "Whenever I call to mind the state of wretchedness in which my life was spent when there, how can it be otherwise but that my very soul must shudder when any proposal is made for my return?" (211). Calvin continued, "[W]hile I call to mind by what torture my conscience was racked at that time, and with how much anxiety it was continually boiling over, pardon me if I dread that place as having about it somewhat of a fatality in my case" (211). But Calvin exhibited a true dependence on God and desire to obey him, whatever it cost, writing to Farel just over two weeks later, "I am prepared to follow fully the calling of the Lord, so soon as he shall have opened it up before me" (218).

[28] Within weeks of returning, Calvin was able to establish the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, which laid the foundation for long-term reform for the Genevan church. Gordon, *Calvin*, 124–27; Beza, "Life of John Calvin," xxxviii–xl.

[29] Calvin's writings encompass 59 volumes, totaling nearly 22,000 pages. Selderhuis, preface to *The Calvin Handbook*, viii.

until his death on May 27, 1564.

## Union with Christ in Calvin's Theology

Prior to seeking to understand Calvin's doctrine of worship, it is necessary to gain a better grasp of his theology as a whole, and holding a prominent place in that theology is the believer's union with Christ by faith through the Spirit.[30] An analysis of this doctrine situated within his larger theological vision is central to the concerns of the present study. Numerous scholars, theologians, and pastors have discussed at great length the function of union with Christ for Calvin, particularly as it relates to his understanding of salvation.[31] Even though his thinking and spirituality are described as being "deeply

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[30] For arguments supporting this assertion see François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (1950; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 234–42; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (1959; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), v; Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 58–63; Paul Wells, "Calvin and Union with Christ: The Heart of Christian Doctrine," in *Calvin: Theologian and Reformer*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Garry J. Williams (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2010), 73–77. Others have gone even further in asserting the significance of union with Christ in Calvin's theology, notably Charles Partee, who suggests the "doctrine of 'union with Christ' as the central mystery of Calvin's thinking about every other doctrine." Charles Partee, "Calvin's Central Dogma Again," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, no. 2 (1987): 198. In response, it has been pointed out that too much has been made of the centrality of union with Christ in Calvin's theology; but John Fesko, while making this very argument still agrees that "union with Christ is an important and even fundamental element of Calvin's soteriology." John V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology (1517-1700)* (Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 25.

[31] A few of the more significant treatments on union with Christ in Calvin's theology include Wilhelm Kolfhaus, *Christusgemeinschaft bei Johannes Calvin* (Neukirchen, Germany: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1939); H. A. Brglez, "Saving Union with Christ in the Theology of John Calvin: A Critical Study" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1993); Tamburello, *Union with Christ*; J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008). For some briefer discussions of this topic see Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (1952; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 197–204; Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth, 1956), 120–26; Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church and the Eucharist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 177–205; John H. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (1989; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 98–103; Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65, no. 2 (2003): 165–79; Cornelis Venema, "Union with Christ, the 'Twofold Grace of God,' and the 'Order of Salvation' in Calvin's Theology," in *Calvin for Today*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2009), 91–113; Wells, "Calvin and Union with Christ"; Bruce L. McCormack, "Union with Christ in Calvin's Theology: Grounds for a Divinization Theory?" in *Tributes to John Calvin: A Celebration of His Quincentenary*, ed. David Hall (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010), 504–29; Richard A. Muller, "Union with Christ and the *Ordo Salutis*: Reflections on

impregnated with union with Christ,"[32] this doctrine does not originate with Calvin, nor did he rediscover it as if it had been lost for centuries. The Genevan Reformer stood in a long line of those who had gone before, building on their theological insights as he compared their work to God's Word.[33] Additionally, as Muller asserts, he "was hardly an isolated figure in the early development of Reformed thought on union with Christ."[34] Inspired by his fellow Reformers, Calvin infused his collective works with some of the clearest and most poignant statements on the Christian's spiritual union with Christ.[35] The saturation of this doctrine throughout his writing raises the question: what is it about union with Christ that demands so much of Calvin's attention? In order to understand its role, one must begin by grasping how union with Christ fits within the context of Calvin's broader theological framework.[36]

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Developments in Early Modern Reformed Thought," in *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 202–43; Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Justification and Union with Christ," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2015), 248–69.

[32] McDonnell, *John Calvin, Church and Eucharist*, 177.

[33] J. V. Fesko provides a helpful overview of medieval forerunners on union with Christ in John V. Fesko, "Union with Christ," in *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 426–28. Of note, he highlights Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (1911; repr., Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948), 3a.1.2; Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, trans. Kilian Walsh and Irene M. Edmonds, 4 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1971); Jean Gerson, *Selections from "A Deo Exivit," "Contra Curiositatem Studentium," and "De Mystica Theologia Speculativa,"* ed. and trans. Steven E. Ozment (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1969).

[34] Muller, "Union with Christ and *Ordo Salutis*," 204. Muller particularly highlights the contemporary contributions of Pierre Viret, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and Wolfgang Musculus (212-19).

[35] Kuyper states that compared to Calvin none of the Reformers "present this, *unio mystica*, this spiritual union with Christ, so incessantly, so tenderly, and with such a holy fire as he." Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri de Vries (1900; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 325.

[36] Zachman uses this approach related to union with Christ "within the larger context of [Calvin's] theological vision as a whole." Randall C. Zachman, "*Communio Cum Christo*," in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 23–30. His discussion does not pertain to my latter concern, worship.

## Calvin's Theological Vision

Calvin's theological understanding begins with God who, far from being a tyrannical and distant deity,[37] is "the fountain of every good."[38] As the source of all benevolence, Calvin's God is viewed as his generous and good Father.[39] B. B. Warfield asserts, "The sense of divine Fatherhood is as fundamental to Calvin's conception of God as the sense of His sovereignty."[40] Because God is both Lord and Father, he is the one that humanity must exclusively seek because "complete happiness" can only be found in him.[41] Indeed, according to Calvin, "The highest human good is to be united with God

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[37] Gerrish writes, "Everyone knows the popular image of Calvin's God as the absolute monarch whose autocratic will is the inflexible cause of all that happens." Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (1993; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 22. He goes on to cite the English Congregationalist, W. B. Selbie, who states, "The whole Calvinistic system is built on the idea of God's greatness and remoteness from man. He is an absolute sovereign, and His arbitrary will governs all things." W. B. Selbie, *The Fatherhood of God* (London: Duckworth, 1936), 75–76. Erich Fromm argues, "Calvin's God, in spite of all attempts to preserve the idea of God's justice and love, has all the features of a tyrant without any quality of love or even justice. In blatant contradiction of the New Testament, Calvin denies the supreme role of love." Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (1941; repr., New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 88.

[38] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.1. See also Ps 36:9. The metaphor for God as a fountain who overflows in goodness permeates Calvin's writings and sermons; for example: "You cannot behold [God] clearly unless you acknowledge him to be the fountainhead and source of every good." Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.2. Another example is Calvin's commentary on Rom 5:11: "We glory that God is ours, every blessing which can be conceived or desired is obtained and flows from this source." John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 8 (1960; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 110. Additional examples are cited throughout this section.

[39] Calvin writes, "Let the first step toward godliness be to recognize that God is our Father to watch over us, govern and nourish us, until he gather us unto the eternal inheritance of his Kingdom." Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.6.4. See also Julie Canlis, "The Fatherhood of God and Union with Christ in Calvin," in *"In Christ" in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation*, ed. Michael J. Thate, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Constantine R. Campbell (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 399–426. Canlis argues convincingly that Calvin "is painting the whole biblical story in terms of a *father and son*" (403).

[40] Benjamin B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of God," *Princeton Theological Review* 7, no. 3 (1909): 425. Warfield goes on to say that Calvin's "doctrine of God is preeminent among the doctrines of God given expression in the Reformation age in the commanding place it gives to the Divine Fatherhood" (425). For recent treatments on this topic see Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 22–31; Canlis, "Fatherhood of God and Union with Christ," 402–8.

[41] Made apparent in its very title, the first book of the *Institutes* gives itself to establishing "The Knowledge of God the Creator." Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.1.

who is the fountain of life and of all good things."[42]

From this knowledge of God proceeds knowledge of humanity.[43] This knowledge "lies first in considering what we were given at creation and how generously God continues in his favor toward us."[44] It rests in an awareness of the overwhelming goodness of the Maker, who is separate from his creation.[45] A tension exists between the Creator and the creature that can only be resolved by God.[46] This dialectic leads to a second and more specific distinction between Creator and creature, and that is the distinction between the divine and human. The divine One, as the source of all good, is supremely the object of thanks for humanity.[47] To be truly human is to give thanks to God. Understanding the glory and goodness of God as Creator and Father highlights the terrible loss that takes place in the Fall. Adam's unfaithfulness led him to turn against "God's great bounty, which had been lavished upon him," by seeking worth and happiness beyond God himself.[48] Brian Gerrish comments, "The special race created to reflect the bounty of God in thankful acknowledgment thus fell into the thankless pride

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[42] Commentary on Heb 7:25 in John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, trans. William B. Johnston, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 12 (1963; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 101.

[43] Calvin opens the *Institutes* stating, "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.

[44] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.1.

[45] Commentary on Ps 115:17-18 in John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 530.

[46] Wendel summarizes the importance of the Creator-creature distinction in Calvin's theological vision by writing, "Calvin places all his theology under the sign of what was one of the essential principles of the Reform: the absolute transcendence of God and his total 'otherness' in relation to man. . . . Above all, God and man must again be seen in their rightful places. That is the idea that dominates the whole of Calvin's theological exposition, and underlies the majority of his controversies." Wendel, *Calvin*, 151.

[47] Torrance notes, "Calvin practically equates the *imago* with the *actio* of gratitude." Thomas F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (1949; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 71n6.

[48] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.5.

that spurns God's bounty."[49] Adam failed as a faithful son and the result of his fall was that all that God had given was replaced with its opposite evil: blessing became curse, righteousness became sin, and life became death. All of humanity is guilty because "enclosed within them" is this "seed of sin" that "continually bears new fruits" rendering humanity "naturally abominable to God."[50] The consequence of the Fall is that humans no longer have God as Father, but instead become "children of wrath" (Eph 2:3).[51]

The great chasm between humanity and God brought on by sin, which "has completely estranged us from the Kingdom of Heaven," leaves all people with no hope of being restored to the joy of life with God as his children unless "the very majesty of God descends to us," according to Calvin.[52] Humanity requires a mediator, someone to take its place as the faithful son. This is just what God does in sending his only-begotten Son, the God-man, the one true Mediator, Jesus Christ. Canlis observes, "The son in the garden failed; the son in the covenanted nation failed; but this Son who took 'Adam's place in obeying the Father' does not fail."[53] Through the incarnation, Jesus enacted the reversal of the Fall, enabling humanity to receive all that it lost. Calvin argues, "He took our nature upon himself to impart to us what was his, and to become both Son of God and Son of man in common with us."[54] Jesus accomplished this through his death and resurrection. Calvin explains, "Through his death, sin was wiped out and death extinguished; through his resurrection, righteousness was restored and life raised up, so

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[49] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 46.

[50] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8, 11.

[51] Calvin observes, "This curse, while it seizes and envelops innocent creatures through our fault, must overwhelm our souls with despair. For even if God wills to manifest his fatherly favor to us in many ways, yet we cannot by contemplating the universe infer that he is Father." Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.6.1.

[52] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12.1.

[53] Canlis, "Fatherhood of God and Union with Christ," 409; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12.3.

[54] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12.2.

that—thanks to his resurrection—his death manifested its power and efficacy in us."[55] Calvin roots his entire theological vision in knowledge of God, knowledge of humanity, and the coming of a Redeemer.

However, a problem of access to the Father, the fountain of grace, remains for humanity. Christ has both paid the debt of the sinner and won salvation by his righteous life, but how are salvation and its benefits received by humanity? How can the bridge of time between Jesus and today be crossed? How can the work of Christ fundamentally change the identity of a person? This dilemma leads Calvin to press the question, "How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son . . . that he might enrich poor and needy men?"[56] If goodness is found only in God and this goodness has been poured out on Christ, then how can any person gain access?[57]

It is precisely here that the goal of Calvin's theology and the importance of union with Christ rises to the surface:

> First, we must understand, that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us.[58]

All that Christ receives is not for himself but for the good of humanity.[59] Christ became

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[55] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.13.

[56] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

[57] Wendel writes, "No doubt Christ, by his death has obtained for us the possibility of effectually receiving the benefits that God intended for us, but this, according to Calvin, is as yet no more than a kind of potential grace, which man, while he is a sinner and therefore separated from Christ and a stranger to him, cannot receive automatically." He goes on to write, "Communion with Christ, the *insitio in Christum*, is the indispensable condition for receiving the grace that the Redemption has gained for us." Wendel, *Calvin*, 234–35.

[58] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

[59] Commenting on John 17:23, Calvin declares that Jesus is teaching that "in Him dwells all the fullness of blessings and that what was hidden in God is now made plain in Him, that He may pass it on to His people." John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 11-21 and the First Epistle of John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 5 (1959; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 149.

man to give to sinful men what they could otherwise never attain. Calvin writes, "In God, indeed, is the fountain of life, righteousness, power and wisdom; but this fountain is hidden and inaccessible to us. Yet in Christ the wealth of all these things is laid before us that we may seek them in Him."[60] Elsewhere he adds, "For from the hidden fountain of the Godhead life was miraculously infused into the body of Christ, that it might flow from thence to us."[61] The good that God possesses in himself is bestowed on his people as they are united to Christ.

The great blessing of this union is not only "salvific benefits to give to a bereft humanity," as Canlis notes,[62] but even more so the true life and joy found in receiving the Son's own "union with the Father."[63] If "our fullest happiness consists in our union with God who is the chief good," then the blessed life is found in being united to Christ.[64] Christ, then, "united Himself to us in order to unite us to Himself."[65] Apart from this union, humanity is without hope, because "all that he possesses is nothing to us until we

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[60] Commentary on John 1:16 in John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 1-10*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 4 (1961; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 23.

[61] John Calvin, "Mutual Consent in Regard to the Sacraments between the Ministers of the Church of Zurich and John Calvin, Minister of the Church of Geneva," in Calvin, *Tracts and Letters of John Calvin*, 2:238.

[62] Canlis, "Fatherhood of God and Union with Christ," 411.

[63] In his commentary on John 17:10 Calvin says, "We shall not be satisfied with having Christ, if we do not know that we possess God in him. We must therefore believe that there is such a unity between Father and Son as makes it impossible that they shall have anything separate from each other." Calvin, *John 11-21*, 5:142. Canlis remarks, "Christian 'union with God' takes the shape of Christ: in adoption, we are joined by the Spirit to Jesus who in turn *opens up to us his earthly relationship to his Father*." Canlis, "Fatherhood of God and Union with Christ," 412.

[64] Commentary on 1 Cor 3:23 in John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John W. Fraser, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 9 (1960; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 83.

[65] Wells, "Calvin and Union with Christ," 75.

grow into one body with him."[66] It is in union with Christ that humanity is finally able to receive life and grace from God as his sons and daughters.

### Union with Christ through the Holy Spirit by Faith

With the importance of union with Christ situated within Calvin's broader theological vision, one must next address what makes the union between Christ and the saved sinner possible. Calvin understood that the Holy Spirit was the necessary agent of union with Christ. Willem van't Spijker writes, "To Calvin, the question of how Christ's beneficence becomes ours was central to theology as a whole. The answer is because Christ does not live outside of us, but within us through his Spirit, and we in him."[67] The blessing of life with God takes place through the Spirit who unites believers to Christ by creating the faith to comprehend the Christ presented in Scripture.

Calvin understood union with Christ to be a profoundly spiritual union. The Spirit enables an intimate relationship with Christ through which the Christian receives God's grace, and the Spirit remains as "the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself."[68] By this Calvin means that the Christian has been "engrafted into the body of Christ by the secret agency of the Spirit."[69] The Spirit enables the Christian to "come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits."[70] Canlis states, "It is the Spirit who has inaugurated the sphere in which we can now taste God as *Father*."[71] Calvin's conviction rises from Paul's

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[66] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

[67] Willem van't Spijker, "Bucer's Influence on Calvin: Church and Community," in *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community*, ed. D. F. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35.

[68] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

[69] Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:238.

[70] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

[71] Canlis, "Fatherhood of God and Union with Christ," 413.

reminder to the Corinthian church: "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11). Commenting on this verse, Calvin writes, "Christ, therefore, is the source of every blessing to us; it is from Him that we obtain everything. But Christ Himself, with all His blessings, is communicated to us by the Spirit."[72] In this union, Christ "pours Himself into us. . . . by the power of His Spirit, He engrafts us into His Body, so that from Him we derive life."[73] Only by this Spirit-wrought union with Christ can the Christian find true life.

Union with Christ is only possible by faith, meaning that there is nothing any human can do to initiate, contribute to, or accomplish this union. The Spirit makes it his "principal work" to "lead us into the light of the gospel" by working faith in those God has chosen to make his children.[74] Calvin defines faith as "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."[75] Rather than being based on knowledge and "comprehension," faith's chief activity is to confidently attest to the goodness of God seen in Jesus Christ.[76]

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[72] Commentary on 1 Cor 6:11 in Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 9:127.

[73] Commentary on Eph 5:31 in John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 11 (1965; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 209. Paul makes this point in 1 Cor 12:13, writing that "in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body."

[74] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.4.

[75] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.7.

[76] Calvin writes that faith is "persuaded of what it does not grasp." Pointing to Paul's words in Eph 3:18-19, he says that "what our mind embraces by faith is in every way infinite, and that this kind of knowledge is far more lofty than all understanding." Calvin concludes, "The knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than in comprehension." Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.14. Commenting on Calvin's discussion of faith, Wendel articulates, "The knowledge of faith is not directed to any given doctrinal truth, but to God's good will." Faith is a matter "of having a full and entire certitude about him." Wendel, *Calvin*, 241.

While faith is the necessary condition for being united to Christ, the act of exercising faith does not accomplish anything on its own. Calvin argues that faith by itself "does not possess the power" for salvation; it is "only the instrument" that opens the "mouth of our soul" to receive Christ and his grace.[77] The instrumentality of faith comes not from its action but from its object, namely, Jesus Christ. Calvin points to the "faith of Christ" that Paul references in Ephesians 3:12, meaning that faith must function "to contemplate what is exhibited to us in Christ."[78] Rather than being a meritorious end, as a gift of the Holy Spirit faith draws its power from its object, for "[faith] does not reconcile us to God at all unless it joins us to Christ."[79] Calvin held that the faith given to the believer by the Spirit effectually unites the Christian to Christ.

**The Double Grace of Union with Christ**

Calvin's discussion of receiving this union in Christ through the Spirit by faith leads to an explanation of the benefits that are actually received through this union. Calvin declares,

> Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's Spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.[80]

The double grace the Christian receives in union with Christ is a new identity and a new life, justification and sanctification, righteousness and regeneration.[81] It is the "wonderful

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[77] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.7.

[78] Commentary on Eph 3:12 in Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 164.

[79] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.30.

[80] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

[81] Calvin uses the terms *sanctification* and *regeneration* synonymously. Wendel notes, "Calvin makes no special distinction between the two terms." Wendel, *Calvin*, 242n31. For example, commenting on 1 Cor 1:2 Calvin writes, "The word 'sanctification' denotes separation . . . when, by the Spirit, we are

exchange" because where sin once reigned, the believer receives righteousness, and where death held all captive, the believer obtains resurrection life.[82] Günther Haas describes this reality: "Believers' union with [Christ] achieves both the death of their old sinful natures so that they are freed from the control and the penalty of sin and the renewal of their whole natures by the power of the Spirit in fellowship with God."[83] The double grace of union with Christ means that the Christian participates in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Union with Christ is the foundation for Calvin's doctrine of salvation that Jesus is both Savior and Lord.[84] Accordingly, the double grace of salvation cannot be separated from the person of Christ.[85] For those who have been united to Christ, justification and sanctification are inseparable. Calvin declares, "These benefits are joined together by an indissoluble bond, so that those whom he illumines by his wisdom, he redeems, those whom he redeems, he justifies, those whom he justifies, he sanctifies. . . . Although we may distinguish them, Christ contains them both inseparably in himself."[86] Calvin derived this idea from Romans 8:2, commenting that "the grace of regeneration is never

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born again into newness of life." Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 9:18; see also Muller, "Union with Christ and *Ordo Salutis*," 209.

[82] Calvin later describes the "wonderful exchange" of this union, "which out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself, he has clothed us with his righteousness." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.2.

[83] Günther H. Haas, "Ethics and Church Discipline," in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 333.

[84] Muller, "Union with Christ and *Ordo Salutis*," 206.

[85] Wells writes, "Participation in Christ implies the realization of the twofold grace in the believer's life. One cannot be in Christ unless one partakes of the righteousness and holiness implied in His death for sin and His living to righteousness." Wells, "Calvin and Union with Christ," 88.

[86] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.16.1.

separated from the imputation of righteousness."[87] The double grace received in this union is always distinct, but never separate. It is impossible for one to be justified and not sanctified, or sanctified without being justified. The Christian cannot have salvation without holiness or morality without mercy, since—as Calvin famously states—"[Christ] cannot be divided into pieces."[88]

When the Christian is united to Christ he or she becomes a child of God as a result of being "engrafted by faith into the body of Christ, and that by the agency of the Holy Spirit we are first counted righteous by a free imputation of righteousness, and then regenerated to a new life."[89] Through this spiritual union the Christian receives all the benefits of salvation, from being counted righteous, to being numbered among the children of God and walking in the resurrection life.[90] "We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ," writes Calvin. "We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else. . . . In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and no other."[91] It is only through Spirit-worked faith in Jesus Christ that Christians are united to Christ so that they can receive salvation and its benefits.

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[87] Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 157.

[88] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.16.1.

[89] Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:213.

[90] Key to Calvin's understanding is 1 Cor 1:30, where "Paul tells us, in passing, what, and how great, are the treasures with which Christ is provided, and in doing so he seeks to describe at the same time our mode of existence in Christ." First, Christ is wisdom for the Christian because "the Father has revealed Himself fully in Him for us, so that we may not desire to know anything apart from Him." Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 45–46. Second, he is the believer's righteousness rendering one "accepted by God, because He atoned for our sins by His death, and His obedience is imputed to us for righteousness" (46). Third, Christ is the Christian's sanctification as "we . . . are born again by His Spirit into holiness, that we may serve God." Here Calvin adds that justification and sanctification "go together" and "if anyone tries to separate them, he is, in a sense, tearing Christ to pieces"; so "faith lays hold of regeneration just as much as forgiveness of sins in Christ" (46). Fourth, in Christ initial and final redemption is found where "we are delivered by His goodness from all slavery to sin and from all the misery which flows from it" (46).

[91] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.19.

**The Church and Union with Christ**

After expounding the way the grace of Christ is received in union by faith through the Spirit, Calvin turns to the external means by which that grace is proclaimed and maintained.[92] Outside means of grace are essential because "in our ignorance and sloth we need outward helps to beget and increase faith within us, and advance it to its goal."[93] Out of his goodness and grace, God has given his children all they need to walk in the faith that brings them to Christ. Fundamental among these means is the church. It is the place where "God is pleased to gather his sons" in order to nourish and help them as they are "guided by her motherly care," says Calvin.[94] Wilhelm Niesel declares, "The church is the sphere of the self-revelation of God and of the encounter between Christ and ourselves."[95] While the Lord could have perfected his own people in a moment, he instead "desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the church."[96] In so doing, through its spiritual ministry the church functions as a gift to join people to Christ and keep them there.

Preaching and the sacraments are the instruments God has given the church to introduce the gospel and maintain its flourishing. After highlighting the Lord's institution of these instruments, Calvin concludes, "God, therefore, in his wonderful providence

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[92] The full title of the fourth book of the *Institutes* is "The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein." Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. 4.

[93] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.1.

[94] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.1. Inspired by the early church fathers, Calvin continues, "For those to whom [God] is Father the church may also be Mother." See also Cyprian, who says, "You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother." Cyprian, "The Unity of the Catholic Church," in *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. Maurice Bévenot, vol. 25 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1956), 48–49; see also Augustine's commentary on Ps 89:52 where he states, "Let us love our Lord God, let us love His Church: Him as a Father, Her as a Mother: Him as a Lord, Her as His Handmaid, as we are ourselves the Handmaid's sons." Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, trans. John Henry Parker (London: F. and J. Rivington, 1850), 4:269. He goes on to write, "Hold then, most beloved, hold all with one mind to God the Father, and the Church our Mother." Augustine, *Expositions on Psalms*, 269.

[95] Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 185.

[96] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.5.

accommodating himself to our capacity, has prescribed a way for us, though still far off, to draw near to him."[97] Through their institution, Calvin states, "There is no doubt that the object of the whole spiritual government of the Church is to lead us to Christ, as it is by him alone we come to God, who is the final end of a happy life."[98] Thus, God equips the church with these aids to foster the proclamation of the gospel in order to introduce and then fortify the reality of the believer's life in Christ.[99] Through its ministry of the Word and administration of the sacraments, the church points people to Christ and nourishes them with Christ.

But the church does not only exist as a signpost pointing to Christ, as if it were an external institution detached from God or his people; because believers are united to Christ, the church is the body of Christ with Christ as its head. Niesel argues that it is "the sphere where Christ comes into our lives" and offers himself to his people.[100] It is the place where "all the elect are so united in Christ that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body," Calvin states.[101] The preeminence of Christ in the church, even as he joins believers to himself, makes him the focus and atmosphere of all that takes place in the church. As Wendel highlights, the church is "a community which rests solely upon the action of Christ in us."[102] For Calvin, Jesus is the "foundation of the Church, because He is the one and only source of salvation and eternal life, because in

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[97] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.1.

[98] Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:212.

[99] In accordance with this, the church is not an institution that the believer can grow beyond needing. Indeed, as God's chosen means for gospel ministry, "We depend upon it for the whole of our spiritual life and all our sanctification." Wendel, *Calvin*, 294.

[100] Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 187.

[101] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.2.

[102] Wendel, *Calvin*, 295.

Him we know God the Father, because the fountain of all our blessings is in Him."[103] Jesus Christ is the aim of Calvin's theology because it is only through being united to him that one can come to God.[104] Calvin keeps this focus consistent and clear throughout his writings, and understanding the function and role of Christ in his theology provides the appropriate context to approach his doctrine of worship. Because Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of God's goodness as the redeemer, mediator, and new identity for saved humanity, he then becomes both the context and content for the church's worship.

## Calvin's Doctrine of the Church's Worship

For Calvin, the church's worship flows from the great gift of being united to Christ. As the center and foundation of the church's life together, corporate worship becomes an opportunity to be directed to the blessed reality of union with Christ, to experience it, and to go forward in the good of it. As Calvin states, "Believers have no greater help than public worship, for by it God raises his own folk upward step by step."[105] The gathering of the church in worship is an "inestimable privilege" and it is

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[103] Commentary on 1 Cor 3:11 in Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 74.

[104] Also see Neisel: "The goal of the theology of Calvin is Jesus Christ." Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 120; and Canlis: "Calvin's theology is comprehensive because of his relentless drive to read all theology, all of Scripture, and all of the Christian life through the person of Christ." Canlis, "Fatherhood of God and Union with Christ," 401. Importantly, Canlis goes on to say that Calvin's "doctrine of union with Christ is not an end in itself," rather it is through Christ that believers ultimately "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

[105] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.5. Calvin often used spatial metaphors to describe the interaction between God and humanity. God accommodates himself to people by descending to them in order that his people might experience a spiritual ascent to him. Witvliet provides an excellent overview of Calvin's use of spatial metaphors in John D. Witvliet, "Images and Themes in John Calvin's Theology of Liturgy," in *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 133–39. Witvliet writes, "Calvin's theology of worship is, in part, revealed in his use of simple prepositions: up, down, in, out. God comes down accommodating to human capacity by making provision for liturgical expression. Worshipers rise to God by offering spiritual worship, elevating their mind to God. This occurs most fundamentally within the human person and is given expression externally through tangible, public means." Witvliet, "Images and Themes in Calvin's Theology," 138. For example, commenting on Ps 9:11 where God is described as sitting "enthroned in Zion," Calvin comments that the earthly worship God provides his people is not "to bind their thoughts to earthly elements" but "these symbols [are meant] to be ladders by which the faithful might ascend to heaven." Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 41.

"the great end of our existence to be found numbered among the worshipers of God."[106] Union with Christ brings the believer from spiritual poverty to life as a worshiper of God in the family of God.

Calvin held that the church's worship should rightly be an experience of the goodness of God, an expression of gratefulness for that goodness shown through Jesus Christ, and an encouragement in the faith that effects union with Christ.[107] Consequently, he cared a great deal about what the church did as it gathered together.[108] Elsie McKee observes that the weekly gathered worship of the church was "one of the most important forms of spiritual formation for Calvin."[109] From his lengthy discussions of the Lord's Supper to his emphasis on the preached Word, to his commentaries on the law and the prophetic and poetic books of the Old Testament, the vital importance of corporate worship is never far from Calvin's mind. Prior to evaluating the doctrine of corporate worship in Calvin's thinking, I first turn to its priority, which proves foundational to this doctrine and is made plain in a remarkable work he penned in defense of the Reformation.[110]

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[106] Commentary on Ps 52:8 quoted in Witvliet, "Images and Themes in Calvin's Theology," 148. See also Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 276. Original source is found in John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss (Braunschweig, Germany: C. A. Swetschke and Son, 1863), 31:529.

[107] These three categories contain significant overlap with the four headings Old presents: *adoratio, fiducia, invocatio,* and *gratiarum actio.* Hughes Oliphant Old, "Calvin's Theology of Worship," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship; Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 419–23.

[108] Johnson argues, "Calvin may rightly be regarded as among the most influential liturgists ('worship leaders' in today's parlance) in the history of the church. . . . As 'worship leaders' go, Calvin has few rivals." Terry Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin: Recovering the Historic Ministry and Worship of Reformed Protestantism* (Darlington, England: EP Books, 2014), 12.

[109] McKee, *John Calvin*, 83.

[110] Theodore Beza, Calvin's contemporary and friend, later reflected on Calvin's treatise: "I know not if any writing on the subject, more powerful or solid, has been published in our age." Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini*, 21:136.

**The Necessity of Reforming the Church**

In 1543, Calvin's Strasbourg mentor and fellow Reformer, Martin Bucer, wrote him a letter requesting that he address the current state of affairs between Catholics and Protestants in preparation for the Imperial Diet of Spiers.[111] Calvin obliged Bucer and wrote his treatise "The Necessity of Reforming the Church."[112] He addresses the present evils of the church, the remedies proposed by the Reformers, and the urgency of this work for the sake of the gospel. Within these three sections, Calvin highlights the four things that are necessary for holding to Christianity and maintaining its truth: worship, salvation, the sacraments, and ecclesial government. He describes right understanding of worship and salvation as the soul of the church and the sacraments and government as its body.[113]

Calvin argues that without right worship and true salvation, the body is but "a dead and useless carcass."[114] Of primary interest to the current study is what he means by the right worship of God:

> Its chief foundation is to acknowledge Him to be, as He is, the only source of all virtue, justice, holiness, wisdom, truth, power, goodness, mercy, life, and salvation; in accordance with this, to ascribe and render to Him the glory of all that is good, to seek all things in Him alone, and in every want have recourse to Him alone. Hence arises prayer, hence praise and thanksgiving—these being attestations to the glory which we attribute to Him.[115]

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[111] Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini*, 11:634-35. The Emperor, Charles V, called the diet to meet in February 1544 to discuss the restoration of the church in order to garner support for his own political agenda from Protestants and their sympathizers. See also Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Lyle Bierma, expanded ed. (2006; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 147–48; Maarten Stolk, "Calvin and Rome," in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 111.

[112] John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church, Presented to The Imperial Diet at Spires, A.D. 1544, in the Name of All Who Wish Christ to Reign," in *Tracts and Letters of John Calvin*, 1:121–234. The original Latin title is *Supplex exhortatio ad Caesarem* and can be found in Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini*, 6:435–534.

[113] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:126.

[114] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:127.

[115] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:127.

He holds that the worship due to God is one that recognizes that God is exactly who he says he is. Worship that looks to God as the source of all that is good, and in turn seeks him alone for life, is the "true and sincere worship" that "God approves, and in which alone He delights."[116] Moreover because of the recognition of this truth, worship looks to God for true life and joy as it takes the form of adoration of God, denial of the flesh, and devotion to God and his ways.

Foundational in Calvin's doctrine of worship is the Word of God.[117] The only source of this right worship is "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23), and God provides the directives for this worship in his Word; thus the church's worship must be regulated by Scripture.[118] Calvin declares, "The Word of God is the test which discriminates between his true worship and that which is false and vitiated."[119] The antithesis of God's rule for worship is "will worship" where the conception of worship is self-defined and deemed acceptable as long as it is conducted with "some kind of zeal for the honour of God."[120] But Calvin contests that God desires obedience over sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22; Prov 21:3; Isa 29:13; Jer 7:21-23; Matt 12:7, 15:9), so then "every addition to his word, especially in this matter, is a lie"; it is "vanity."[121]

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[116] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:127.

[117] Old comments, "If one is to find the marrow of Calvin's theology of worship, one must take quite seriously his concern that Christian worship be according to scripture." Hughes Oliphant Old, "John Calvin and the Prophetic Criticism of Worship," in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 230.

[118] Speaking of the Word of God Calvin writes, "The rule which distinguishes between pure and vitiated worship is of universal application, in order that we may not adopt any device which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunctions of Him who alone is entitled to prescribe. Therefore, if we would have Him to approve our worship, this rule, which he everywhere enforces with the utmost strictness, must be carefully observed." Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:128.

[119] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:130.

[120] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:128–29.

[121] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:129.

As Calvin presses into the evils of the worship of the church, he stresses the error of supposed access to God by means other than approaching him through Christ by the Spirit.[122] He argues that it was the church's going beyond God's Word in its veneration of saints and images, and in its commitment to its ceremonies and rituals, which rendered its errors so egregious, its worship unacceptable.[123] But "God invites us to pray to him . . . and sets forth Christ as the Advocate in whose name our prayers are heard."[124] Jesus is the one mediator between God and humanity and he is the only way to approach God in worship,[125] which leads into Calvin's second heading addressing a true understanding of salvation. As fallen people acknowledge their sinfulness and inability to save themselves, their only hope is to come to Jesus, finding in him reconciliation with the Father, sacrifice for sin, and the righteousness that God requires. Then, "with firm and solid confidence," they must rest in Christ, "feeling assured that Christ is so completely his own, that he possesses in him righteousness and life."[126] Being in Christ is the only way a sinner can stand before the holy God.

Calvin turns to describe how the Reformers have sought to bring people to this place of rest in Christ: it is through worship. Calvin says that the purpose of the

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[122] In regards to praying to saints Calvin writes, "Passing by Christ, the only Mediator, each betook himself to the patron who had struck his fancy, or if at any time a place was given to Christ, it was one in which he remained unnoticed, like some ordinary individual in a crowd." Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:130.

[123] Calvin details these distortions of true worship over several pages in Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:129–32. He concludes by stating that "the whole form of divine worship in general use in the present day is nothing but mere corruption" (132).

[124] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:130. Calvin describes how the Reformers have "taught men when brought to Christ no longer to doubt and waver in their prayers, as they were wont to do, but to rest secure in the word of the Lord" (157).

[125] Calvin writes, "Let us remember that Christ, by his death, purchased for himself the honour of being the eternal advocate and peace-maker to present our prayers and our persons to the Father; to obtain supplies of grace for us, and enable us to hope we shall obtain what we ask. As he alone died for us, and redeemed us by his death, so he admits no partnership in this honour." Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:191.

[126] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:134.

Reformation kept the end in mind, namely, the glory of God, and so they labored to highlight his abundant grace by "mak[ing] the perfections in which His glory shines better and better known."[127] This unwavering exaltation of God fuels right worship, solid confidence, earnest prayer, genuine self-denial, and devoted obedience. He asserts that no one can deny that the exhortation to all has been as follows:

> To expect the good which they desire from none but God, to confide in His power, rest in His goodness, depend on His truth, and turn to Him with the whole heart—to recline upon Him with full hope, and recur to Him in necessity, that is, at every moment to ascribe to him every good thing which we enjoy, and show we do so by open expressions of praise. And . . . we proclaim that a complete fountain of blessings is opened up to us in Christ, and that out of it we may draw for every need.[128]

It is remarkable to note that when Calvin is provided the opportunity to detail the very heart of the Reformation, he turns first to the right worship of God. Stated another way, Calvin saw right worship of God as fundamental to a strong defense of the doctrines and practices of the Reformation. At its heart is a recognition of the overflowing grace of God, a declaration of the inadequacy of humanity to find life outside of God, and the great hope found in the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ. As demonstrated by Calvin, this heartbeat of the Reformation finds expression in the corporate worship of the church.

Calvin's doctrine of worship is built upon the foundation of Scripture and flows from the blessing of union with Christ. Because the believer is united to Christ, the church is given reason to worship. In other words, Calvin's doctrine of worship flowed out of his doctrine of union with Christ. This doctrine, in its breadth and depth, presents a central theme that unifies Calvin's understanding of the importance of corporate worship and the call of the Reformers that one can only be saved by faith alone through grace

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[127] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:147.

[128] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:147.

alone in Christ alone. It is in the practice of corporate worship that "the Lord who is one God, and who designed that we should be one in him, is training us up together in the hope of eternal life, and in the united celebration of his holy name."[129]

## The Components of Corporate Worship

Calvin's defense of the Reformation highlights the central importance of union with Christ in his understanding and practice of corporate worship. In his commentary on Psalm 24:7, he remarks, "In our worship we are lifted up to God; for what are the sacraments, the preaching of the word, the holy assemblies and the church's government but that we may be united to God?"[130] In this statement, Calvin succinctly articulates the need for and purpose of the practice of Christian worship. Word, sacrament, prayer, and praise all function to bring believers to know and enjoy the union they experience with God through Christ by the Spirit. Calvin holds that there are three elements that comprise the worship of the gathered church if it is to be according to Scripture: "These are the preaching of his word, public and solemn prayers and the administration of his sacraments."[131] It is to these three biblically prescribed components of corporate worship to which I now turn in order to demonstrate how Calvin understood each to function in the life of the church. I argue that the cumulative effect of these practices enables an experience of God's gracious activity, an expression of gratitude, and an encouragement in faith.

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[129] Commentary on Ps 52:8 quoted in Witvliet, "Images and Themes in Calvin's Theology," 148. See also Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 276; original source is found in Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini*, 31:529.

[130] Commentary on Ps 24:7, in Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 131.

[131] John Calvin, "The Form of Prayers and Songs of the Church, 1542: Letter to the Reader," trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Calvin Theological Journal* 15, no. 2 (November 1980): 161.

**The Preaching of the Word of God**

One of the most important products of the Reformation was the recovery of God's Word in the public life of the church.[132] Nowhere is this recovery made more plain than in the re-centering of the church's worship upon the Word of God through the ministry of preaching. Calvin holds, "There is no other way of raising up the Church of God than by the light of the word, in which God himself, by his own voice, points out the way of salvation."[133] He understood there to be a close relationship between the Word that God speaks and the preaching that takes place in the church, because "God ordinarily uses means to communicate with his people."[134] This takes place through the work of the Spirit that accompanies the preaching of God's Word, for "preaching of the gospel would be of little use, if God did not give power and efficacy to his doctrine by the Spirit."[135] It is through the ordinary means of using men to preach the gospel that God's presence is realized, his grace is experienced, and he is glorified.

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[132] For example, Manetsch argues that in the Reformers' eyes "the Protestant Reformation was a divinely orchestrated *religious* or *spiritual* event that found its origin in the recovery, reading, and faithful application of the Bible." Scott M. Manetsch, ed., *The Reformation and the Irrepressible Word of God: Interpretation, Theology, and Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 2–3. He points to Luther's "Exhortation to the Clergy Assembled at the Diet at Augsburg," and writes, "From Luther's perspective . . . the central contribution of the Protestant Reformation was to restore to their rightful place in Christ's church the Scriptures and the 'free and pure gospel'" (3). See also Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2013), 80–86; Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture; What the Reformers Taught . . . and Why It Still Matters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016), 33–75. For a helpful overview of Calvin as a preacher see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 4, *The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 90–134; and Joel R. Beeke, *Reformed Preaching: Proclaiming God's Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 112–31.

[133] Commentary on Mic 5:2, in John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets: Jonah, Micah, Nahum*, trans. John Owen, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 257.

[134] Ralph Cunnington, *Preaching with Spiritual Power: Calvin's Understanding of Word and Spirit in Preaching* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2015), 82; cf. "For although God's power is not bound to outward means, he has nonetheless bound us to the ordinary manner of teaching." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.5.

[135] Commentary on Isa 55:6 in John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1853), 165; cf. Cunnington's section on "The Source of the Word's Power" and "Word and Spirit," in Cunnington, *Preaching with Spiritual Power*, 88–108.

**God's presence through God's Word.** Calvin taught that the preaching ministry is a primary expression of God's presence among his people. One place this is demonstrated is in Calvin's commentary on Haggai. At the beginning of Haggai, the prophet addresses the people, and those who heard "obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him" (Hag 1:12). Commenting on this passage, Calvin writes,

> The message of the Prophet obtained as much power as though God had descended from heaven, and had given manifest tokens of his presence. We may then conclude from these words, that the glory of God so shines in his word, that we ought to be so much affected by it, whenever he speaks by his servants, as though he were nigh to us, face to face.[136]

Through the prophet God gives "tokens of his presence," that he might be heard and understood.

For Calvin, preaching is an act of God's accommodation to his people whereby he speaks in such a way that is comprehensible and effective for change.[137] "For Calvin it was not the words of the Bible printed in a book," writes Old, "but the Bible proclaimed by a preacher under the power of the Holy Spirit and received through the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit by the faithful with obedience which was the Word of God."[138] This is a benevolent expression of God's gracious presence among his people. Nicholas Wolterstorff remarks, "The sermon is 'sacramental' of the speech of God—not of the static presence of God but of God's *very speaking*."[139] Through the proclamation of

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[136] Commentary on Hag 1:12 in John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets: Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai*, trans. John Owen, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1848), 343.

[137] Gregg R. Allison, "The Protestant Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture: A Reformulation on the Basis of Biblical Teaching" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1995), 87–131.

[138] Old, *Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship*, 213.

[139] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Reformed Liturgy," in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 288.

the Word by the power of the Spirit, God's presence is known and experienced by his people.

**God's grace through God's Word.** Where God is present and God speaks, his grace shows forth to those who hear by faith. It is through the proclamation of the Word of God that the church is reminded of the blessed opportunity of life in Christ and reoriented to the truth of being one with Christ. Old remarks, "Calvin understood the purpose of preaching. It was to present to the people of God both the promises of God and the warnings of God, that they might be received by faith."[140] Calvin speaks of preaching as "the sacramental word" as that in which the preacher proclaims a promise "to lead the people by the hand wherever the sign tends and directs us."[141] Accordingly, when God's Word is made plain among God's people they can experience the joy of life in Christ. Carl Trueman comments, "Within Reformed Protestantism this union is first and foremost a function of the Word preached. We hear the Word, we grasp the Word by the Spirit, and we are thereby united to Christ in a manner that gives us all of his benefits."[142] Apart from the Word being proclaimed, heard, and believed the people of God cannot benefit from their union with Christ.

Again, the Spirit's work is necessary in order to ascertain by faith what is presented through God's Word. Calvin points to Isaiah's words where the Lord says, "My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth" (Isa 59:21). Calvin comments that God is present with his people through the Spirit and the Word, because the Spirit "is continually joined" to the Word and the "efficacy of the Spirit" empowers the proclamation of the Word, so now through

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[140] Old, *The Age of the Reformation*, 121.

[141] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.4.

[142] Robert Kolb and Carl R. Trueman, *Between Wittenberg and Geneva: Lutheran and Reformed Theology in Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 195.

preaching "the Church will never be deprived of this invaluable blessing."[143] It is the Spirit's work to bring about the grace of God through the Word of God. This is God's design for distributing his grace to the church. God purposes to use preaching to showcase his power and goodness to his people.

**God's glory through God's Word.** Preaching played a central role in Calvin's doctrine of worship because it is God's chosen means of glorifying himself by demonstrating his power. As Paul discloses to the Corinthians, God empowers weak men to preach his message (see 1 Cor 1:18-2:5). A favorite theme of Calvin was the choice of God to use frail men to declare his Word. For example, Calvin describes preaching as "the living voice of God inseparable from its effect, as compared with the empty and lifeless eloquence of men."[144] But when the preacher speaks he receives "a singular privilege" that God would choose "to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them."[145] Cunnington remarks, "The minister's preaching is not efficacious because of its own strength. Rather it is the power of God."[146] Commenting on Isaiah 11:4, Calvin remarks, "Christ acts by [his ministers] in such a manner that He wishes their *mouth* to be reckoned as his *mouth*, and their *lips* as his *lips*; that is, when they speak from his mouth, and faithfully declare his word."[147] As the Word is preached, the preacher avails the Christian nothing apart from the fact that God effectively speaks through the weakness of men, and in this God is glorified.

All of Christian worship carries with it the double-priority of glorifying God

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[143] Commentary on Isa 59:21, in Calvin, *Isaiah 49-66*, 271.

[144] Commentary on 1 Thess 1:4 in Calvin, *Commentary on Romans and Thessalonians*, 336.

[145] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.5.

[146] Cunnington, *Preaching with Spiritual Power*, 101.

[147] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1850), 381.

and edifying his people, and when the people of God are built up, it is then that God is glorified. Through the proclamation of the gospel, God lays claim on the lives and hearts of his people. "God is glorified when his Word is heard by his people and they are transformed into his image," writes Old. He continues, "Through the preaching of the gospel God's people are transformed into the image of Christ."[148] To rightly receive God's Word, hearing must be accompanied by humility and faith. Calvin describes receiving God's Word through "the ministry of men" as the "most useful exercise in humility," because "when a puny man risen from the dust speaks in God's name, at this point we best evidence our piety and obedience toward God if we show ourselves teachable toward his minister."[149] God could have chosen to speak "from heaven or send angels," but it is "our advantage" that God uses the words and exhortation of men to "gently draw us to himself."[150] Thus, it is this presentation of God's Word to God's people that leads to experiencing the real blessing of being united to Christ, because "there is no other way of raising up the church of God than by the light of the word, in which God himself, by his own voice, points out the way of salvation."[151] The preaching of God's Word glorifies God by bringing individuals to recognize that salvation can be found in God and God alone.

**The Prayers of the Church**

Second to the centrality of God's Word in gathered worship, prayer plays a primary role in the life of the church. Calvin holds that the church is to be a "house of prayer" (Matt 21:13; Isa 56:7). Drawing from Jesus's words, Calvin comments that "by

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[148] Old, *The Age of the Reformation*, 132.

[149] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.1.

[150] Commentary on Isa 59:21, in Calvin, *Isaiah 49-66*, 271.

[151] Commentary on Mic 5:2, in Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, 257.

this term the chief part of his worship lies in the office of prayer, and that the temple was set up like a banner for believers so that they might, with one consent, participate in it."[152] Prayer is that practice by which Christians actively live out the full implications of the double grace received in Christ.[153] "In prayer," writes Billings, "the *duplex gratia* becomes the Trinitarian mode of transforming believers."[154] In order for God's people to participate in and be transformed through prayer, the prayers of the church must be "in the language of the people, which can be generally understood by the whole assembly. For this ought to be done for the edification of the whole church, which receives no benefit whatever from a sound not understood," Calvin argues.[155] "True prayer" must include "understanding and affection."[156] For Calvin, prayer is the primary expression of the worshipping church and it must be conducted with an engaged heart either spoken or sung.

**Prayer in corporate worship.** While Calvin is well known for his broader role in recovering the centrality of the Word of God in the gathering of the people of God, it is easy to overlook his significant contribution to the reform of corporate worship. But, as Gibson and Earngey note, it is Calvin's liturgy that provides the "rhythms" that "run through Reformed worship today."[157] Calvin's expressed aim was not to invent a new mode of worship, but to purify it.[158] For this he acknowledged his indebtedness to Bucer

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[152] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.29.

[153] See also Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and Gift*, 106–16.

[154] Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and Gift*, 116.

[155] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.33.

[156] John Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," in *Tracts and Letters of John Calvin*, 2:71.

[157] Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey, *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 304.

[158] See T. Brienen, *De liturgie bij Johannes Calvijn* (Kampen, Netherlands: De Groot

and his time in Strasbourg.[159] Building on Bucer's foundation, Calvin wrote the *Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers and Ecclesiastical Song, with the Manner of Administering the Sacraments*, originally published in Geneva in 1542 (with a revised edition published in 1566) and in Strasbourg in 1545.[160] This was the form of worship that Calvin continued to use for the duration of his ministry in Geneva. The entire liturgy that Calvin develops centers on the infusion of God's Word amidst a litany of prayers that all express the Christian's sole dependence on God realized in Christ by the Spirit.

The *Form* begins with the declaration of Psalm 124:8, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth," and is immediately followed by a prayer of confession, an acknowledgment of humanity's utter need before a holy God. "For since in every sacred assembly we stand before the sight of God and the angels," writes Calvin, "what other beginning of our action will there be than the recognition of our own unworthiness?"[161] The very presence of God renders confession the necessary starting point for the corporate gathering of the church.[162] Elsewhere, Calvin writes, "It is the very beginning of worshipping and glorifying God when men entertain humble and low

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Goudriaan, 1987), 171–72.

[159] On his deathbed Calvin wrote, "As to the prayers . . . I adopted the form of Strassburg, and borrowed the greater part of it." John Calvin, "Calvin's Farewell to the Ministers of Geneva," in *Letters of John Calvin* (1833; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2018), 282. Thompson writes that "most scholars have said that Calvin did no more than alter Bucer's work here and there." Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Cleveland, OH: World Pub., 1961), 189. For the best treatment on Bucer's liturgical contribution and thinking see Ottomar Frederick Cypris, *Martin Bucer's Ground and Reason: A Commentary and Translation* (Yulee, FL: Good Samaritan, 2016); see also Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 278–97.

[160] This section presents the English translation of Calvin's liturgy that combines the 1542 and 1566 Geneva versions and the 1545 Strasbourg version contained in Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 299–336; while also drawing from the version included in Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 197–224. Both Thompson, Gibson, and Earngey provide an excellent overview of the development of Calvin's liturgy. For additional information see McKee, *John Calvin*, 98–134; Old, "Calvin's Theology of Worship," 412–35; Terry L. Johnson, "Calvin the Liturgist," in Hall, *Tributes to John Calvin*, 118–52.

[161] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.4.11.

[162] Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 190. Thompson observes that for Calvin, "Confession was the proper beginning of worship" (190).

opinion of themselves."[163] Along with this recognition of sin and weakness, the liturgy also recognizes the need for God to "extend and increase the graces of [the] Holy Spirit" because it is the Spirit who "gives birth to true penitence."[164] Calvin goes on in the *Form* to say that confession acts as a "key" by which "a gate to prayer is opened both to individuals in private and to all in public."[165]

Calvin's prayer of confession implores God to "have mercy upon us . . . in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."[166] The only ground for approaching the holy God takes place by being found in Jesus. Throughout Calvin's *Form* the church is reminded at every turn that the only way to God is "through Jesus Christ our Lord."[167] This is the primary expression of the importance of union with Christ in Calvin's liturgy. The Christian's only standing before God is in Christ. Calvin purposes for the church to articulate its dependence on Jesus Christ, explaining, "Scripture offers him alone to us, sends us to him, and establishes us in him."[168] He then quotes Ambrose of Milan: "[Christ] is our mouth, through which we speak to the Father; he is our eye, through which we see the Father; he is our right hand, through which we offer ourselves to the Father. Unless he intercedes, there is no intercourse with God either for us or for all saints."[169] Later in his explication of the Lord's Prayer, Calvin emphasizes, "We ought to offer all prayer to God only in Christ's name. . . . For in calling God 'Father,' we put

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[163] Calvin, *Commentaries on Twelve Minor Prophets*, 344.

[164] John Calvin, "The Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers and Songs (1545, 1542, 1566)," trans. Bernard Aubert, in Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 309.

[165] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.4.11.

[166] Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 308.

[167] Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 308–10.

[168] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.21.

[169] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.21. For original source see Ambrose, "De Isaac Vel Anima," in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (Vienna: Academia Scientiarum Austriaca, 1866), 8.75.

forward the name 'Christ.'"[170] The people of God must gather to pray always and only in and through Christ.

The confession is followed by the minister declaring "a few words from Scripture to comfort the conscience and then [he] pronounces absolution," recognizing that "the heavenly Father wishes to be propitious to [us] in Jesus Christ."[171] It is only in Jesus Christ that one can obtain absolution of sin. Following these words of assurance, the congregation sings a psalm in Calvin's Genevan liturgy and sings the Decalogue in his Strasbourg version. Each of these elements leads into a prayer of illumination before the preaching of God's Word. While the Genevan liturgy leaves the form of this prayer up to the discretion of the minister, the Strasbourg version again reiterates the basis of the church's approach to God. The church can "call upon our heavenly Father . . . pleading with him to cast his merciful eye on us his poor servants . . . as he sees us in the face of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord."[172] Union with Christ is the basis for the church's call upon its heavenly Father. Calvin goes on: "As he has established him as Mediator between himself and us—let us pray to him—as all the fullness of wisdom and light is in him—that he would guide us by his Holy Spirit."[173] Again, it is the reality of who the Christian is in Christ that enables the prayer of the church.

Following the sermon, Calvin provides direction for a prayer of intercession. The prayer begins, "Almighty God, heavenly Father, you have promised to answer the requests that we bring you in the name of your beloved Son Jesus Christ our Lord."[174] In this prayer Calvin insists on the faith the people of God must have in the promises of

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[170] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.36.

[171] Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 309.

[172] Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 310.

[173] Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 310.

[174] Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 311.

God. This faith roots itself in the reality that God indeed answers prayers made in the name of Jesus. Calvin expounds this point in the *Institutes*: "The prayers of the church are never ineffectual. . . . For he, who promises that he will do whatever two or three gathered together in his name may ask, testifies that he does not despise prayers publicly made."[175] The prayer of intercession bolsters the church's faith by reminding the church of the instruction "to gather in [Christ's] name with the promise that he will be in our midst and be our Intercessor before you."[176] Whenever the church prays in the name of Jesus there are these three promises: God hears the requests, Christ is present, and Christ intercedes for the church.

The prayer of intercession concludes with a cry for God's help in fighting sin. This too is rooted in the Christian's union with Christ, highlighting the sanctifying work that belongs to this spiritual union. Calvin prays that "we might give ourselves entirely to your dear Son Jesus our Lord, the only Savior and Redeemer, with all our affection and firm confidence; so that as he dwells in us, he might mortify our old Adam, renewing us for a better life."[177] This only takes place "by the power of [God's] Spirit."[178] The minister leads the church in crying out that God would "be pleased to strengthen us by your Holy Spirit and to equip us with your graces that we may continually resist all temptations, and persevere in this spiritual battle until we attain full victory that at last we may triumph finally in your kingdom with our Captain and Protector, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."[179] Christ dwelling by the Spirit in the Christian is the means of mortification and perseverance. In the prayer of intercession, and throughout the entire

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[175] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.29–30.

[176] Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 311.

[177] Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 314.

[178] Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 314.

[179] Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 315–16.

*Form*, Calvin makes abundantly clear that all of the church's ground and hope in prayer is realized and effectual only in Christ by the Spirit.

**Prayer and the heart.** In his *Institutes* Calvin describes the goal of prayer: "that hearts may be aroused and borne to God, whether to praise him or to beseech his help."[180] He recognizes that through prayer the believer is "reshaped by the Spirit into a new creation in Christ."[181] Essential to this is the right disposition of the mind and heart. In prayer there must be "present a sincere and true affection that dwells in the secret place of the heart,"[182] because "prayer itself is properly an emotion of the heart within, which is poured out and laid open before God, the searcher of hearts."[183] Elsewhere Calvin writes that God "requires men to give him the heart in all cases, and more especially in prayer, by which they hold communion with him."[184] Calvin understood that "when we have to deal with God nothing is achieved unless we begin from the inner disposition of the heart."[185]

Calvin repudiates prayer driven by ritual or ceremony. Witvliet notes that in his commentaries on the minor prophets "Calvin's emphasis was on inner worship, the worship of the heart. Without it, external liturgy is meaningless."[186] For example, Calvin points to Joel 1 and writes, "The priests did not rightly worship God; for though their

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[180] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.29.

[181] Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and Gift*, 116. Billings expounds this point: "Calvin's argument is not one of passivity, but of dynamic movement: moving out of one's 'old self' and trust in oneself apart from God, one enters into a God-given identity as child of the Father, united to Christ. In giving up hope in oneself and putting all of this hope in Christ, the 'overflowing fountain,' one is formed by the Spirit into the image of Christ, receiving true riches and happiness" (116).

[182] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.30.

[183] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.29.

[184] Calvin, "Catechism of Church of Geneva," 71.

[185] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.16.

[186] Witvliet, "Images and Themes in Calvin's Theology," 130.

external rites were according to the command of God, yet as their hearts were polluted, it is certain that whatever they did was repudiated by God."[187] While God "promises to be near to those only who call upon him in truth," the disposition of the heart is of vital importance since those who come to prayer deceitfully and without sincerity "he abominates and curses."[188] True worship is always a matter of the heart. Commenting on John 4:23, Calvin writes, "The worship of God is said to consist in the Spirit because it is only the inward faith of the heart that produces prayer and purity of conscience and denial of ourselves, that we may be given up to obedience of God as holy sacrifices."[189]

Hypocrisy is the antithesis of true worship and it undermines the Christian's identity in and with Christ. To counteract the danger of coming to God hypocritically, with a heart unaffected by the reality of God, the problem of sin, and the blessing of adoption, Calvin's instruction on prayer and his *Form* for public prayer are saturated in the reality of union with Christ. When believers recognize their unworthiness and unrighteousness, the only basis for hope is not found within themselves but in Christ. These are the critical ingredients of prayer: "Genuine and earnest prayer proceeds first from a sense of our need, and next, from faith in the promises of God."[190] It is in Jesus Christ that all God's promises find their "Yes" (2 Cor 1:20). Prayer is a recognition that what people ultimately need is found outside of themselves. So, Calvin writes, "It remains for us to seek in him, and in prayers to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him."[191] Through Christ lies the only path to attaining a new heart. So, Calvin asks,

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[187] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets: Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, trans. John Owen, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846), 35. Old includes several additional examples in Old, "Calvin and Prophetic Criticism of Worship."

[188] Calvin, "Catechism of Church of Geneva," 71.

[189] Calvin, *Commentary on John 1-10*, 99.

[190] Calvin, "Preface to Commentary on Psalms," 56.

[191] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.1.

"With what confidence would anyone address God as 'Father'? Who would break forth into such rashness as to claim for himself the honor of a son of God unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ? . . . What he has of his own by nature may become ours by benefit of adoption if we embrace this great blessing with sure faith."[192] In this Calvin stresses that the hope of the Christian is not in human performance but in the ongoing activity of God. He recognizes that the blessing of prayer only comes through union with Christ by the Spirit.[193]

**Prayer and melody.** Calvin understands prayer to be explicitly doxological, taking on two distinct expressions: spoken and sung.[194] In the *Institutes* Calvin describes how the tongue "was peculiarly created to tell and proclaim the praise of God. But the chief use of the tongue is in public prayers, which are offered in the assembly of believers, by which it comes about that with one common voice, and as it were, with the same mouth, we all glorify God together, worshiping him with one spirit and the same faith."[195] God is praised through the corporate voice of God's people as they are brought together in Christ to speak and sing in prayer.

Calvin's robust view of singing as an important expression of corporate prayer was something that developed early in his ministry. In 1536, Calvin published his first edition of the *Institutes*. The scant mention of public worship reveals a young Calvin who had spent little time in the reforming church and, according to Charles Garside, "the book

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[192] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.36.

[193] Todd Billings writes of the Trinitarian nature of prayer: "While union with Christ makes the riches of the Father available to believers, the Spirit enables believers to pray. Moreover, the Spirit enables believers to experience God as Abba Father." Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and Gift*, 110.

[194] Calvin writes, "As for the public prayers, there are two kinds: the first are made with the word only, the others with song." John Calvin, "Foreword to the Psalter," in McKee, *John Calvin*, 94.

[195] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.31.

clearly demonstrates, his concerns then were not liturgical."[196] When it came to prayer, Calvin emphasized private over public prayer, drawing from Matthew 6:6 to show that Jesus taught that "prayer is something secret, which is both principally lodged in the heart and requires a tranquility far from all our teeming cares."[197] Within this context of discussing prayer, Calvin makes the earliest known reference to singing in his writings by briefly turning to "voice and song," and, reflective of the importance of the heart in prayer, writes that unless they "spring from deep feeling of heart, neither has any value or profit in the least with God."[198]

By the beginning of 1537, Calvin's tone shifted from regarding singing cautiously to emphasizing it as an essential aspect of public worship. In January 1537, he presented the "Articles of the Church and Worship" for Geneva.[199] The "Articles" dealt with the essential changes needed for the reforming church in Geneva under Farel and Calvin's leadership. They emphasized the institution of regular observance of the Lord's Supper (which also necessitated a recovery of the practice of church discipline and excommunication), the instruction of children in doctrine, the drafting of marriage ordinances, and—most pertinent to the present discussion—the singing of psalms in public worship. After his discussion of the practice of the Lord's Supper and the need for excommunication,[200] Calvin turns next to singing: "It is a thing very expedient for the

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[196] Charles Garside, "The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 69, no. 4 (1979): 13.

[197] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (1975; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 74.

[198] Calvin, *Institutes (1536)*, 74. Garside writes of Calvin's 1536 mention of music that "his reserve about the value of admitting music to worship was such that on the basis of what he published in 1536 the possibility of a Calvinist liturgy employing music to any considerable degree seemed at best remote." Garside, "Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music," 6–7.

[199] John Calvin, "Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva Proposed by the Ministers at the Council January 16, 1537," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen, trans. J. K. S. Reid, vol. 22, Library of Christian Classics (London: SCM Press, 1954), 48–55.

[200] Calvin writes that "a Church cannot be said to be well ordered and regulated unless in it the

edification of the Church, to sing some psalms in the form of public devotions by which one may pray to God, or to sing his praise so that the hearts of all be roused and incited to make like prayers and render like praises and thanks to God with one accord."[201] Here, in the matter of a few months, Calvin goes from describing singing as something that has potentially no value to something that is entirely necessary for a well-ordered church. Already, in early 1537, Calvin recognizes that as the church sings the Word of God for the glory of God, it is encouraged to look to God and be lifted up to him.[202]

By 1542, Calvin's thoughts on singing were even more developed, no doubt due to the influence of Bucer and the time Calvin spent in Strasbourg.[203] As he establishes his ministry in Geneva, he provides his most extensive doctrine of singing in the church in his "Letter to the Reader" that was included in "The Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," and in future editions of his Psalter for the church.[204] Calvin begins by

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Holy Supper of our Lord is always being celebrated and frequented, and this under such good supervision that no one dare presume to present him self unless devoutly, and with genuine reverence for it. For this reason, in order to maintain the Church in its integrity, the discipline of excommunication is necessary, by which it is possible to correct those that do not wish to submit courteously and with all obedience to the Word of God." Calvin, "Articles," 48.

[201] Calvin, "Articles," 48.

[202] Critical to Calvin's understanding of singing, made apparent in the "Articles," is that the church's songs should be according to Scripture. For Calvin, this meant a priority on psalm singing, which is rooted "in the ancient Church and in the evidence of Paul himself." Calvin, "Articles," 53. Singing psalms proves to be incalculable in "the profit and edification which will arise" from the practice of singing them together (53). The importance of psalm singing will be further discussed later in this section. Interestingly, because of Calvin's concern for the heart, his use of the vernacular in the liturgy, and his desire to return to the forms found in Scripture and the early church, Garside describes Calvin's comments in 1537 as "unmistakably Bucerian," as opposed to what he writes in the 1536 *Institutes*, which "reveal an inclination, at the least, to Zwingli's position." Garside, "Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music," 13.

[203] Gordon spends considerable time describing the impact this season had on Calvin, commenting, "Three years in Strasbourg changed Calvin" (85). Gordon, *Calvin,* 85-102. Witvliet also highlights the influence of Strasbourg on Calvin's thinking: "Calvin first heard psalm singing during his first visit to Strasbourg, where Protestant congregations had, by the mid-1530s, a decade of experience in singing the psalms in worship." John D. Witvliet, "The Spirituality of the Psalter: Metrical Psalms in Liturgy and Life in Calvin's Geneva," *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 2 (November 1997): 275; see also Garside, "Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music," 10–16; Gordon, *Calvin*, 285-88.

[204] This letter was included in the 1542 edition of the *Form*, and an expanded version was included when the *Form* was republished in 1543. After that it was included as a foreword to the psalter. Calvin, "Letter to the Reader"; see also McKee, *John Calvin*, 91. English translations of Calvin's letter are

explaining that the order of gathered worship is not "to amuse people in seeing and gazing upon it" but that "his people might profit."[205] All that occurs in public worship is for the purpose of edification (1 Cor 14:26). After brief comments on prayer and the sacraments, Calvin turns to singing, noting that this form of prayer has existed since the beginning of the New Testament church.[206] He then describes that the singing of the church must be well stewarded because "singing has great power and vigor to move and inflame men's hearts to call upon and praise God with a more vehement and burning zeal."[207] Singing edifies the church by directing those gathered to give thanks and praise for God's "power, goodness, wisdom, and justice."[208] Singing is a means for the church to express gratefulness to God for the blessings seen and received in Christ, for this is where God's glory is principally revealed.

In addition to edifying the church by giving praise to God, singing is also a means of protecting the church, keeping it tethered to Christ. Through truth joined to melody, God keeps his people from wandering away from the experience and enjoyment of his grace. "Our Lord," writes Calvin, "to distract us and draw us away from the allurements of the flesh and of the world, presents us every means possible in order to occupy us in that spiritual joy which he so much commends to us."[209] God chiefly

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available from Ford Lewis Battles in Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 160–65; and by Garside in Calvin, "Foreword to the Psalter," 91–97. Throughout this section I refer to the Battles translation.

[205] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 160.

[206] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 162–63.

[207] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 163.

[208] Calvin also highlights the blessing that songs sung in the church do not stay there, but instead go out of the church's doors, so that "even in houses and in the fields it would be for us an incitement and as it were an organ to praise God, and to raise our hearts to him for him to console us." Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 163.

[209] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 163.

provides music for this use. "It is intended for our profit and salvation."[210] Because of its purpose and power, singing in the church must be guarded, "that it may be useful for us and not dangerous."[211] Calvin recognizes the "secret power" that the two parts of music—words and melody—exercise when joined together. He writes, "It is true that all evil speaking perverts good morals, but when melody accompanies it, it pierces the heart much more strongly and so enters inside it."[212] Therefore, it is all the more necessary to "have songs not only honorable but also holy" that have the effect of encouraging the church "to pray and praise God, to meditate on his works, in order to love him, fear, honor and glorify him."[213] Thus, the songs of the church must be honorable, holy, and compelling.

Calvin turns to address the source of these songs, the book of Psalms: "When we have searched here and there, we will not find better songs nor ones more appropriate for this purpose than the Psalms of David."[214] These songs are of the Holy Spirit, and "when we sing them, we are certain that God has put the words in our mouth as if they themselves sang in us to exalt his glory."[215] Similar to the psalmist's call in Psalm 100, church members make a joyful noise and sing because they know certain truths about God (Ps 100:1-3), and these truths are made plain in Scripture. Calvin saw psalm singing as vital to the life of the church; thus, he published a psalter for the Genevan church.[216]

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[210] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 163.

[211] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 164.

[212] Calvin likens this to a "funnel" where "wine is forced into a vessel, likewise venom and corruption is distilled into the depths of the heart by melody." Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 164.

[213] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 164.

[214] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 164.

[215] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 164.

[216] See also Garside, "Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music," 24–29; Witvliet, "Spirituality of the Psalter," 273–97; Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, 111–15.

McKee remarks, "Calvin understood the Book of Psalms as the prayer book of the gathered church, which every member should have in his or her own hands."[217] Psalm singing gives expression to the church's identification with Christ as through his Word God proclaims his glory with his people.

Calvin concludes his "Letter to the Reader" by returning to the importance of the heart in singing, and there is no way to engage the heart without understanding. This is "the difference between the singing of men and that of birds"—namely, that God gives each person the gift "to sing, knowing what he says."[218] Calvin continues, "After understanding must follow the heart and the affection, something that can only happen when we have the song imprinted on our memory never to cease singing it."[219] When the church sings the words of God for the glory of God and the edification of those gathered, the church is protected and hearts are stirred to give thanks, and to behold in God all the goodness of his grace poured out on his children through Jesus Christ.

**The Sacraments**

Calvin, like other Reformers who emerged in the sixteenth century, cared a great deal about the church's understanding and practice of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.[220] Indeed, he wrote extensively on the topic.[221] Wim Janse details

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[217] McKee, *Calvin*, 86.

[218] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 164.

[219] Calvin, "Letter to the Reader," 164. Chrisman notes that by singing the Psalms "the words of Scripture became an intimate part of [the congregation's] thoughts and prayers. Music thus played an important role in opening up the Scriptures to the laity. Through singing they became familiar with the Word." Miriam Usher Chrisman, *Lay Culture, Learned Culture: Books and Social Change in Strasbourg, 1480-1599* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 166.

[220] McKee writes, "The sacraments were . . . a very important part of Reformed worship, especially for Calvin." Elsie Anne McKee, "Reformed Worship in the Sixteenth Century," in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present*, ed. Lukas Vischer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 21.

[221] For a collection of Calvin's writings on the sacraments see John Calvin, *Treatises on the Sacraments: Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Forms of Prayer, and Confessions of Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002). Calvin also devotes several chapters to the topic in Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14-19. For secondary treatments on Calvin's understanding of the sacraments, see

some of the pressure exerted on Calvin's thinking as he wrestled with the significance of the sacraments in the life of the church:

> The mobility of Calvin's ideas about the sacraments resulted, among other things, from changing battle positions, discussion partners (interlocutors), friendships, and church political perspectives. Over against the Catholic and Lutheran emphasis on the "objective" efficacy of the sacrament, Calvin pointed to the efficacy of the Spirit and the necessity of a believing reception; over against Anabaptists and spiritualistic "subjectivism" he stressed the instrumentality of the sacrament. . . . All of his life he tried to narrow the gap between Lutheran "realism" and Zwinglian spiritualism.[222]

Given the various circumstances and arguments that confronted Calvin, it is no surprise that his understanding of the sacraments exhibits clear development over time.[223] It is a failure to read Calvin in light of his own development over time that leads to confusion related to his views on the sacraments. With this in mind, I first demonstrate Calvin's broad understanding of the sacraments, followed by a discussion of their function within the church.

In the final edition of his *Institutes* Calvin addresses the sacraments as an aspect of how God invites and keeps his people in his grace.[224] In light of this, he defines a sacrament as "an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises

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Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*; Thomas J. Davis, *The Clearest Promises of God: The Development of Calvin's Eucharistic Teaching*, AMS Studies in Religious Tradition 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1995); Wim Janse, "Calvin's Eucharistic Theology: Three Dogma-Historical Observations," in *Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres: Conference Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, Reformed Historical Theology 5 (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 37–69; Richard Muller, "Calvin on Sacramental Presence, in the Shadow of Marburg and Zurich," *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (2009): 147–67; Sue A. Rozeboom, "Doctrine of the Lord's Supper: Calvin's Theology and Its Early Reception," in *Calvin's Theology and Its Reception: Disputes, Developments, and New Possibilities*, ed. J. Todd Billings and I. John Hesselink (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 143–65.

[222] Wim Janse, "The Sacraments," in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 345.

[223] See Davis, *The Clearest Promises of God*. Janse summarizes this development by saying that "Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments shows successively Zwinglianizing (1536-1537), Lutheranizing (1537-1548), spiritualizing (1549-1560), and again Lutheranizing (1561-1562) accents." Janse, "The Sacraments," 345.

[224] As seen plainly in the title of Book IV: "The External Means or Aims by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein." Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. 4.

of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men."[225] He follows this with a more succinct definition: "One may call it a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him."[226] In these explanations Calvin makes clear that a sacrament is a visible and outward sign that seals an invisible and inward truth on the believer's heart. In addition to this, it is also an expression of devotion and dependence on God. However, Calvin's emphasis does not fall on the response of the believer but on the action of God.[227] For Calvin, the sacraments of the church are primarily a sphere of God's activity that signify the blessing of being united to Christ by the Spirit through faith.

The Spirit plays an essential role as the active agent in Calvin's understanding of the sacraments; it is through "the agency of his Spirit" that God "performs whatever we obtain by the sacraments."[228] The sacraments do not contain any power intrinsically or in their outward form, but instead any "power or efficacy . . . flows entirely from the Spirit of God."[229] They are not a product of human work or ingenuity, but the grace of God made possible by the Spirit. The sacraments are "a ministry empty and trifling, apart from the action of the Spirit, but charged with great effect when the Spirit works within

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[225] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.1; cf. In his Genevan catechism for children, Calvin describes the sacraments as "an outward attestation of the divine benevolence towards us, which, by a visible sign, figures spiritual grace, to seal the promises of God on our hearts, and thereby better confirm their truth to us." Calvin, "Catechism of Church of Geneva," 83–84.

[226] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.1.

[227] For example, Calvin carefully emphasizes God's activity in the sacraments, not the church's action, for "in adaptation to our weakness, [God] uses them as helps; in such manner . . . that the whole power of acting remains with him alone." Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:216. Calvin's position was held contrary to Zwingli, who emphasized the sacraments as an expression of the believer's allegiance to God. See Huldrych Zwingli, "Of Baptism," in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 24, Library of Christian Classics (London: SCM Press, 1953), 131.

[228] Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:229.

[229] Calvin, "Catechism of Church of Geneva," 84.

and manifests his power."[230]

Ultimately, the Spirit works through the sacraments to give evidence of the realities made possible in union with Christ obtained through faith. Calvin pronounces that "the end for which the sacraments were instituted . . . [is] to bring us to communion with Christ."[231] In baptism Christians are "ingrafted into the body of Christ," while in the Lord's Supper believers are "drawn closer and closer, until [Christ] makes [them] altogether one with himself in the heavenly life."[232] Through union with Christ, the sacraments enable the church to experience the grace of God, express thanksgiving to God, and to be encouraged in faith.

**Sacraments as an experience of God's grace.** In Calvin's theology, the sacraments are a primary means of experiencing the ongoing grace and goodness of God. Calvin comments, "In Baptism or the Lord's Supper we do nothing; we simply come before God to receive His grace. . . . We bring nothing to it but faith, which has all things laid up in Christ."[233] Looking to Jesus, the believer receives the actual gift signified by the sacrament. As a sign, the sacraments always point beyond themselves to a greater reality. Gerrish suggests three conceptions of this idea within the Reformed tradition: symbolic memorialism, symbolic parallelism, and symbolic instrumentalism.[234] While

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[230] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.9.

[231] Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:222.

[232] Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:222–23.

[233] Commentary on Gal 5:3 in Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 95.

[234] Zwingli typified memorialism in its pointing back to a past event, while Bullinger emphasized parallelism where the reality being pointed to is happening in the present. Calvin emphasized an instrumentalist view, where the reality is being brought about through the sign. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 167. Calvin points to 1 Cor 10:16 and comments, "There is no reason for anyone to object that this is a figurative expression by which the name of the thing signified is given to the sign. I indeed admit that the breaking of bread is a symbol; it is not the thing itself. But, having admitted this, we shall nevertheless duly infer that by the showing of the symbol the thing itself is also shown." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

these concepts can all be seen to various degrees in Calvin's thinking, symbolic instrumentalism holds an important and unique place. For Calvin, that greater reality is Christ and his benefits: "It is Christ alone, who in truth baptizes inwardly, who in the Supper makes us partakers of himself, who, in short, fulfils what the sacraments figure, and uses their aid in such manner that the whole effect resides in the Spirit."[235] Just as the Word presents Christ to the church, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper occupy the same role, namely, "to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace."[236] By setting forth Christ to the Christian, the sacraments manifest the presence of God and enable the believer to taste and see the grace and goodness of God.[237]

Regarding baptism, Calvin understands it as an engrafting to Christ and an adoption into God's family. It operates as "the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children."[238] Calvin articulates that baptism is "a testimony that we who are otherwise strangers and aliens, are received into the family of God, so as to be counted of his household."[239] This testimony nourishes the recipient as they experience God's grace through the death and resurrection of Christ. He writes,

> Just as the twig draws substance and nourishment from the root to which it is grafted, so those who receive baptism with right faith truly feel the effective working of Christ's death in the mortification of their flesh, together with the

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[235] Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:216.

[236] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.17.

[237] Billings expounds on this idea, writing, "The sacrament brings a particular *type* of presence: a gracious presence which assures believers of God's good will and free pardon, building up the gift of faith." Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and Gift*, 117.

[238] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.1.

[239] Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," 86.

working of his resurrection in the quickening of the Spirit.[240]

While the efficacy of baptism for forgiveness of sins rests in the finished work of Christ and in the Christian's being joined to him and not in the act itself, baptism signifies the Christian's union with Christ. Calvin writes that a primary reason the believer is baptized in the name of Christ is because "no union is possible for us with Him except by reconciliation, we need Christ to restore us to the Father's favour by His blood."[241] In baptism the believer is "so united to Christ that we become sharers in all his blessings."[242] This is Paul's argument in his letter to the Galatian church. Those who have been "baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:27).[243] Thus, baptism gives evidence of the blessed union the Christian experiences in Christ.[244]

Regarding the Lord's Supper, much of the experience of God's grace comes through the real presence of Christ in this meal.[245] He particularly views the Lord's Supper as a manifestation of the "spiritual presence" of Christ. Drawing from John 6, Calvin explains that God is a gracious Father who delights to give his children gifts: "To nourish us . . . he has, through the hand of his only-begotten Son, given to his church . . . a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which

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[240] Calvin, *Institutes (1536)*, 95.

[241] Commentary on 1 Cor 1:13, in Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 30.

[242] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.6.

[243] Preaching from this text Calvin says that Paul "tells us that in baptism we have 'put on' the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Jesus Christ is our garment, as it were, and he covers up all that would cause the Father to reject us. We are granted grace to come to God through the person of the Son of God, and we are no longer viewed as we are by nature. In brief, Paul highlights here the closeness that exists between the Lord Jesus Christ and those who believe in him, who are members of his body. . . . In order to draw near to God, partake of his Holy Spirit and receive the gifts that pertain to eternal life, we must first be 'in Jesus Christ,' and not think anything of ourselves or of our own virtues." John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress (1563; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 344.

[244] Calvin writes, "We see that the fulfillment of baptism is in Christ, whom also for this reason we call the proper object of baptism. . . . All the gifts of God proferred in baptism are found in Christ alone." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.16.

[245] For a brief introduction to this topic see Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 381–83.

our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality."[246] Gerrish notes that Calvin teaches that the Supper "graphically represents and presents to believers a communion they enjoy, or can enjoy, all the time."[247] While Calvin is adamant that the glorified body of Christ ascended to heaven, he emphasizes that the Holy Spirit has a "secret power" that "truly unites things separated in space."[248] Commenting on 1 Corinthians 11:24, Calvin says that in the Lord's Supper, Christ "imparts Himself to us by the secret power of the Holy Spirit, a power which is able not only to bring together, but also to join together, things which are separated by distance, and by a great distance at that."[249] Through the Supper, those who partake in faith experience the blessing of Christ's spiritual presence as the Christian's heart both "soar[s] up to heaven" and Christ "descends to us" by the power of his Spirit.[250] The sacrament is then a gift of God enabling the believer to taste and see the divine goodness and grace.

**Sacraments as an expression of thanksgiving.** Because Calvin views the sacraments as gifts from God, the proper and necessary response of the church participating in these ceremonies is thanksgiving. This gratitude is expressed through "spiritual worship," encompassing adoration and obedience.[251] Calvin holds that, apart from baptism, true worship is not possible. On this note, Old comments, "Baptism is the

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[246] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.1. Calvin explicitly recognized that John 6 was not about the Lord's Supper because it had not yet been instituted by Jesus; but he writes, "At the same time, I confess that there is nothing said here that is not figured and actually presented to believers in the Lord's Supper. Indeed, we might say that Christ intended the holy Supper to be a seal of this discourse." Calvin, *Commentary on John 1-10*, 169–70.

[247] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 133.

[248] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

[249] Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 247.

[250] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.24.

[251] Calvin puts under the heading of "thanksgiving . . . all the duties of love. When we embrace our brethren with these, we honor the Lord himself in his members." This is the "spiritual worship" that Paul calls the church to in Rom 12:1. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.18.16.

presupposition and basis of all Christian worship. Not only does baptism call us to holiness of life, it consecrates us to the priestly service of prayer and praise."[252] Baptism is an act that signifies the dedication of an individual to God's service. Billings notes, "The promise contained in baptism involves movement from being real participants in Adam to real partakers in Christ."[253] This takes place through faith as the Father's blessings are received in union with Christ by the Spirit and the believer gives thanks to God.

Calvin discusses the priority of giving thanks through the Lord's Supper in the context of refuting the concept of the Roman Catholic Mass.[254] He argues that to treat the Lord's Supper as a work done on behalf of the church contradicts its function as a gift:

> The Supper itself is a gift of God, which ought to have been received with thanksgiving. The sacrifice of the Mass is represented as paying a price to God, which he should receive by way of satisfaction. There is as much difference between this sacrifice and the sacrament of the Supper as there is between giving and receiving. And such is the most miserable ungratefulness of man that where he ought to have recognized and given thanks for the abundance of God's bounty, he makes God in this his debtor![255]

The only right response to the gift of the Lord's Supper is thankfulness to God. Highlighting passages such as Psalm 50:23, Psalm 141:2, and Hebrews 13:15, Calvin describes this response as a "sacrifice of praise."[256] While this "sacrifice" does nothing to appease God's wrath, it gives thanks to God as it proclaims his death until he comes (1 Cor 11:26).

**Sacraments as an encouragement in faith.** Substantially, in Calvin's

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[252] Old, *Worship*, 22.

[253] Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and Gift*, 128.

[254] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.18.

[255] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.18.7.

[256] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.18.17.

teaching the sacraments function as an encouragement in the faith, as nourishment to the believer. They do this first by giving physical evidence and tangible experience of the spiritual blessings found in Christ.[257] They testify to "our eyes and other senses" the spiritual reality the Christian obtains in Christ.[258] As such, they are an expression of the double grace received in him. Through baptism and the Lord's Supper, according to Calvin, "We obtain possession of Christ as the fountain of all blessings, both in order that we may be reconciled to God by means of his death, be renewed by his Spirit to holiness of life, in short, obtain righteousness and salvation."[259] Accordingly, Calvin holds that the sacraments are only efficacious for Christians, not unbelievers, because it is through the Spirit that God "makes the elect receive what the sacraments offer."[260] He writes of the way in which Paul deals with "hypocrites" by emphasizing "the emptiness and worthlessness of the outward sign"; but for Christians, Paul stresses "the truth which they figure."[261] The truth into which the sacraments ultimately build the believer is their union with Christ.

The sacraments provide one more expression of God's accommodation to finite humanity. "As we are surrounded with this body of clay," explains Calvin, "we need figures or mirrors to exhibit a view of spiritual and heavenly things in a kind of

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[257] Calvin writes, "A sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it. . . . It is not so much needed to confirm his Sacred Word as to establish us in faith in it. For God's truth is of itself firm and sure enough." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.3.

[258] Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:214–15.

[259] Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:215.

[260] Calvin, "Mutual Consent to the Sacraments," 2:217.

[261] Commentary on Gal 3:27 in Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 68. Another example of this is found in his commentary on Rom 6:4. Calvin notes that "because he is speaking to believers, [Paul] connects the reality and the effect with the outward sign in his usual manner. . . . In short, he teaches us what the truth of baptism is, when rightly received." Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 123.

earthly manner; for we could not otherwise attain to them."[262] The Christian's faith, because it is expressed while bound by human nature, "is slight and feeble unless it be propped on all sides and sustained by every means."[263] God gives the church these helps—baptism and the Lord's Supper—not as a means of salvation, but to strengthen and nourish each believer so that they might live according to the joy of their salvation in Christ.[264] Calvin writes,

> For seeing we are so weak that we cannot receive him with true heartfelt trust, when he is presented to us by simple doctrine and preaching, the Father of mercy, disdaining not to condescend in this matter to our infirmity, has been pleased to add to his word a visible sign, by which he might represent the substance of his promises, to confirm and fortify us by delivering us from all doubt and uncertainty.[265]

The only nourishment for the adopted child of God is found in Jesus Christ. He is spiritual food for the believer's soul. So, the sacraments function to encourage the faith of God's children by keeping Christ before them.

Baptism functions both internally, "to serve our faith," and externally, "to serve our confession before men."[266] A key signification of baptism is spiritual washing or cleansing. Calvin is clear to show that the water does not contain the power to cleanse or save, but that in this sacrament is proof of "the knowledge and certainty of such gifts."[267] Accordingly, baptism is not merely a door that the believer walks through and

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[262] Calvin, "Catechism of Church of Geneva," 84.

[263] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.3.

[264] Calvin's Genevan catechism articulates it this way: "We are not to cleave to the visible signs so as to seek salvation from them, or imagine that the power of conferring grace is either fixed or included in them, but rather that the sign is to be used as a help, by which, when seeking salvation and complete felicity, we are pointed directly to Christ." Calvin, "Catechism of Church of Geneva," 85.

[265] John Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Supper of Our Lord, in Which Is Shown Its True Institution, Benefit, and Utility," in *Tracts and Letters of John Calvin*, 2:166.

[266] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.1.

[267] Calvin, 4.15.2.

leaves behind. Rather, as Calvin highlights in his Confession of Faith for the French churches, the significance of baptism is to be applied "during the whole period of our life, in order to confirm us in the promises which have been given us, as well of the forgiveness of our sins as of the guidance and assistance of the Holy Spirit."[268] Baptized Christians have no need to go back to the waters again to be washed clean of sins they commit. Instead, as Calvin asserts, "We must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life."[269] Baptism serves as an encouragement in faith that union with Christ is an ongoing reality for the believer.

Through the Lord's Supper, believers receive nourishment as the blessed union with Christ is more fully realized. Regular participation in this meal attests to the reality that in Jesus Christ the Christian has "every thing that is useful and salutary."[270] This is what fuels Calvin's concern for the Lord's Supper. Calvin deems this practice to be so important for the church because of how it strengthens the spiritual reality of the believer's union with Christ.[271] The Lord's Supper by no means establishes this union, but instead gives evidence of it. Calvin writes, "It is only after we obtain Christ Himself, that we come to share in the benefits of Christ."[272] Having received the gift of this union, Calvin declares, "Godly souls can gather great assurance and delight from this Sacrament; in it they have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is his may be called ours."[273] He understood the Lord's Supper, together with

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[268] John Calvin, "Confession of Faith of the Reformed Churches of France," in *Tracts and Letters of John Calvin*, 2:153–54.

[269] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.3.

[270] Calvin, "Short Treatise on Lord's Supper," 2:168.

[271] For more on this theme see Matthew Westerholm, "The 'Cream of Creation' and the 'Cream of Faith': The Lord's Supper as a Means of Assurance in Puritan Thought," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3, no. 1 (2011): 205–22.

[272] Commentary on 1 Cor 11:24 in Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 246.

[273] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.2.

the Word preached, to be the primary nourishment and encouragement in faith for the believer.

## Conclusion

Evident from this overview, Calvin's theology and doctrine of worship are grounded firmly in the importance of union with Christ. Because of the sinfulness and finitude of humanity, the only access one can have to God, the source of all good, is in Jesus Christ. All of the practices of the church, the "means of grace," are meant to invite people into this glorious reality and to continue in the good of it. Ultimately, it is the doctrine of union with Christ that holds the various components of Calvin's doctrine of worship together. It is by being united to Christ that the Christian can experience the abundant goodness of God (Eph 1:3). It is through union with Christ that the believer can express thanksgiving to God (Heb 13:5). It is in union with Christ that the believer is encouraged in faith. Through the church's worship, those united to Christ experience the active and real grace of God, express gratefulness for all that is received in him, and are encouraged by the reality of the hope found in him.

When Calvin addressed the emperor in his defense of the Reformation he wrote the following:

> We differ from others only in this, that by convincing man of his poverty and powerlessness, we train him more effectually to true humility, leading him to renounce all self-confidence, and throw himself entirely upon God; and that, in like manner, we train him more effectually to gratitude, by leading him to ascribe, as in truth he ought, every good thing which he possesses to the kindness of God.[274]

Calvin argues that what sets the Reformers apart is their commitment to help sinful and weak humanity find their all in God and then to live lives of devotion to him that resound with gratefulness for his abundant grace. This was the call of the Reformation then, and it

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[274] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 160.

remains the appeal to the church today. In order to recover the clarity of this call, a recalibration to the importance of union with Christ in the church's worship is vital. But questions remain: "What does this look like today?" and "How should union with Christ effect how the church understands and practices corporate worship?" The remaining chapters endeavor to answer these questions.

# CHAPTER 4

## GOD'S GRACIOUS GIFT: UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE WORSHIP IN LIGHT OF UNION WITH CHRIST

In his work *Living in Union with Christ* Grant Macaskill argues that every discussion of Christian morality and ethics must be situated within the context of union with Christ.[1] He holds that contemporary evangelicalism tends to present a gospel with missing notes, one which does not sufficiently articulate the radical change in identity that takes place in salvation.[2] Describing the problems that arise from this incomplete gospel, he writes,

> It allows us to talk about the Christian life as something that *we* practice in fellowship with the Spirit, without really forcing us to pay attention to *who we now are* in Christ. In doing so, it allows key elements of the gospel to be assimilated, without our recognizing it, to a modern individualism that will always compromise our Christian growth.[3]

Macaskill contends that the church exhibits a propensity to speak of sanctification without taking into account who the Christian now is as one united to Christ. He argues that when the church fails to understand and explain, along with Paul, that the Christian

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[1] He writes, "[We] can never talk about the moral activity of a Christian without always, in the same breath, talking about Jesus, because the goal of our salvation is not that we become morally better versions of ourselves but that we come to inhabit and to manifest his moral identity." Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 1.

[2] Macaskill takes care in using this label. Rather than viewing it as a description that carries a specific "theological account," he uses it to describe "a movement or culture marked by a somewhat fluid set of commitments to specific positions on debates around matters of faith." Macaskill, preface to *Living in Union with Christ*, xn3.

[3] Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 4.

life is one in which they no longer live but Christ lives in them (see Gal 2:20), it will fail to biblically understand what it means to grow as a Christian.

My argument is that this same gospel deficiency is seen, not only in how the contemporary evangelical church understands sanctification, but also in how it regards corporate worship. Instead of situating its conception of worship in light of union with Christ, the church resorts to an understanding of corporate worship that is often incomplete, saying many right things but not enough of them, exhibiting an understanding of corporate worship that is missing notes. As a result, the church often resorts to an understanding of corporate worship primarily in terms of what it does rather than in terms of who it is. Activity supersedes identity.[4] A danger the church confronts in its corporate worship is not necessarily in the particular actions of the church as it gathers in worship but in how believers think about themselves as worshipers. When the church loses clarity on who it is in Christ, the church's worship is undermined as a result. Therefore, the church must strive for an understanding of worship that keeps its own identity in its rightful place, namely, in Jesus Christ.

This chapter continues my overall argument by defining corporate worship in light of union with Christ. First, I evaluate the prevailing metaphor for understanding corporate worship: worship as dialogue. After highlighting strengths and weaknesses of this approach, I argue that understanding the church's worship in view of union with Christ guards against these weaknesses by situating the church's worship in spirit and truth. Second, I explain and defend the first half of a working definition of worship that builds upon the priority of union with Christ. Corporate worship is God's Spirit-enabled and Word-governed gift, initiated by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, for his covenant people to gratefully assemble in space and time to witness to the worth and

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[4] Cf. Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

work of God in Christ by the Spirit through proclamation, prayer, singing and the sacraments as they receive from Christ, act in him, and long for him to come again.[5]

## Worship as Dialogue

One of the most frequently cited paradigms for corporate worship is worship as dialogue: worship is a conversation that takes place between God and his people with a rhythm of revelation and response.[6] Scripture provides the clear basis for this understanding of worship. For example, Robert Rayburn cites passages such as Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1:4-8, Exodus 24, Acts 2, and Revelation 19, highlighting the idea that "worship should be looked upon as a dialogue between God and His people."[7] Rayburn continues, "God speaks to them and they answer Him. God speaks again and they reply." Furthermore, church history attests to this understanding of worship. This is most clearly seen in the "acts of addressing God" that typify "not just some . . . but most liturgical actions."[8] Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that implicit in traditional Christian liturgies is an "understanding of God as one who can and does listen to us, and is capable of responding

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[5] The next chapter will discuss the second half of this definition by addressing the church's grateful response as they practice corporate worship in light of union with Christ.

[6] For example see S. F. Winward, *The Reformation of Our Worship* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1964), 12–31; Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (1980; repr., Wipf & Stock, 2010), 167–222; Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate! Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Pub., 1981), 64; Ralph P. Martin, *The Worship of God: Some Theological, Pastoral, and Practical Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 6; Gary Furr and Milburn Price, *The Dialogue of Worship: Creating Space for Revelation and Response* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1998); F. Russell Mitman, *Worship in the Shape of Scripture* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 31–54; Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 53–145; Samuel G. Parkison, *Revelation and Response: The Why and How of Leading Corporate Worship through Song* (Spring Hill, TN: Rainer, 2018).

[7] Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 118; see also Cherry, who writes, "Ultimately, worship is a conversation between God and God's chosen people. There is a mutual exchange, a holy dialogue, an invested sharing back and forth in worship." Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 9.

[8] Wolterstorff writes, "In all mainstream liturgies—Orthodox, Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, Reformed—not just *some* liturgical actions are acts of addressing God but *most* liturgical actions are of that type." Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 56.

favorably to what we say."[9] When the church gathers in worship, there is a dialogue that takes place as God addresses his people through his Word and the church addresses God through its prayers and songs. Worship as dialogue presents both strengths and weaknesses as it frames the church's understanding of corporate worship.

**Strengths of Worship as Dialogue**

Other than the benefit of having warrant through the testimony of Scripture and its consistent practice throughout the history of the church, understanding worship as dialogue presents two other primary benefits. First, this approach emphasizes God's activity in the church's worship. Rather than seeing corporate worship as something the church solely offers to God, worship as dialogue recognizes that a conversation is taking place between two parties: God and the church. Constance Cherry writes that "corporate worship is a real meeting between God and his people" in which dialogue is necessary, and while "some approaches result in God as the *topic of* this conversation . . . dialogical worship planning results in God as the *partner in* this conversation."[10] This understanding of corporate worship is often expressed through the phrase *revelation and response*. For example, Ralph Martin articulates that worship's "distinctive genius" is seen in "the two-beat rhythm of revelation and response. God speaks; we answer. God acts; we accept and give. God gives; we receive."[11] Here, God is not just the object of worship, but a vital actor in worship: God speaks, acts, and gives. The result is that this framework moves the church's worship away from a self-orientation that emphasizes human activity as carrying primary significance.

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[9] Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 61.

[10] Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 45.

[11] Martin, *The Worship of God*, 6; see also Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 106; Ron Man, *Proclamation and Praise: Hebrews 2:12 and the Christology of Worship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 47–51; Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 44–46.

Second, a dialogical understanding of worship provides structure for corporate worship. For example, Stephen Winward describes this rhythm of revelation and response as the "given structure" and "pattern" of worship where human response is always preceded by God's revelation.[12] This is evidenced in each of the examples from Scripture cited above. Isaiah sees a vision of the glory of God sitting on his throne. In response to the Lord's majestic holiness, Isaiah responds in confession: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5). Upon this confession, Isaiah is given cleansing and forgiveness: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (Isa 6:7). Then God speaks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah responds, "Here am I! Send me" (Isa 6:8). Throughout this scene is a structure of revelation and response. The same pattern can be seen in Jeremiah 1 where God again initiates the encounter. At both Mt. Sinai and at Pentecost, God is the one who first speaks and acts among his people and then the people hear and respond. In understanding worship as revelation and response, the church recognizes that God is the initiator of its worship and the church's worship is a response to his initiative.

In summary, understanding worship as dialogue clearly articulates the interaction between God and his people as seen in various biblical passages. It also strengthens the church's worship by highlighting the activity and initiative of God. This provides structure for what the church does as it assembles. Worship as dialogue emphasizes that all corporate worship of the triune God is marked by the rhythm of revelation and response.

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[12] Winward, *Reformation of Our Worship*, 12. Cherry describes revelation/response as "the normative pattern of dialogue between God and the worshiping community." Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 9.

**Weaknesses of Worship as Dialogue**

While understanding worship as dialogue orients the church's worship toward God's activity and initiative, it may also have the unintended effect of misleading the church by not saying enough. In other words, the problem is not that worship-as-dialogue is wrong, only that it fails to be right enough.[13] While worship-as-dialogue is a helpful starting point for understanding corporate worship, it is an insufficient paradigm on its own. An understanding of worship as dialogue presents at least two weaknesses. The first is an error of symmetry, while the second is an error of relationship.

In the first place, understanding worship as a dialogue between God and humanity can fail to maintain the "fundamental asymmetry" between the Creator and his creatures.[14] While worship-as-dialogue prioritizes the activity of God in the church's worship through revelation, its emphasis on response can imply that corporate worship is a symmetrical conversation carried out by two participants of similar standing. Worship becomes a succession of distinct and separate activities that take place when the church gathers: God speaks, the church responds; God speaks again, the church responds again. It is as though there are two main actors taking turns on the center stage. The result of this is that a symmetry—even an equality—can be implied between God's activity and the church's activity, as if both God and the church share the weight of responsibility as the church gathers to worship.

While failing to address this asymmetrical action, to be fair to the advocates

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[13] This is reflective of Macaskill's argument mentioned earlier in this chapter, where he argues for a more complete understanding of the gospel in relationship to the Christian life. He uses an extended analogy describing a failing piano, where notes have gone out of tune and hammers have become dislodged, leaving certain keys unplayable. The point he makes is that "as vital notes from the scale were lost, the remaining notes, though good, were insufficient to make up for their absence." Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 4–5. His question to evangelicals is this: "Have we sounded certain good notes so loudly and exclusively that they have come to constitute a different melody?" (5) I am arguing that the same is true of how the church often speaks of its corporate worship.

[14] This phrase is borrowed from Christoph Schwöbel, "The Creature of the Word: Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers," in *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, ed. Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 120.

for understanding worship as dialogue, most make explicit mention of the danger of viewing God's activity as separate from the church's activity. For example, Winward cautions, "We must be on our guard against the error that God alone is active in the descending, and man alone active in the ascending movement of worship. For God is active in all true worship, which is impossible in either direction apart from the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit."[15] The biblical reflection of revelation and response understands God as both the initiator and central contributor in the church's worship. He is both revelator and responder, with both revelation and response taking place ultimately in the person and work of Christ by the Spirit. But an understanding of worship as a dialogue still does not go far enough in conveying the level of asymmetry between God's action and the church's action.

This fundamental asymmetry is most clearly seen in the covenantal nature of Christian worship. True worship is only possible through God establishing a relationship with his people, and whenever he does so he also makes provision for their response. It is always predicated upon divine initiative and action. The initiative and provision are seen under the old covenant (Gen 15:7-20; Exod 24), but it is made even more apparent under the new covenant in the sending of the Son and the Spirit. Jeremiah describes the outcome of this new covenant whereby God declares, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:33). The emphasis on God's action ("I will put") is similarly conveyed in Ezekiel 36. He acts "for the sake of [his] holy name" (Ezek 36:22). He will deliver his people (v. 24), cleanse them (v. 25), give them a new heart and new spirit (v. 26), and this spirit—God's very own Spirit—will "cause [them] to walk in [his] statutes" (v. 27). God leaves

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[15] Winward, *Reformation of Our Worship*, 15. Winward illustrates the connectedness of the upward and downward movements of worship by describing them as being "woven together, like the warp and woof of a garment" (15). See also Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 121; Man, *Proclamation and Praise*, 51.

no doubt that he is primary in all of the dealings with his covenant people. Christoph Schwöbel writes,

> Because of this distinction [between God's action and human action] divine and human agency can never compete or co-operate on the same level. God's work is always the condition of the possibility of all human action. But this distinction is not a separation. All human action remains forever dependent on God as its creative ground.[16]

The same is true of the church's worship. God is not merely the one the church gathers to worship; he is the one who is *continuously* active in the church's worship. The church's activity in worship cannot "compete or co-operate on the same level as God."[17] Rather, he is the one who makes the church's activity possible and the one on whom this activity is always dependent. The activity of God in Christian worship is fundamentally asymmetrical from that of the church: it comes first, it is continuous, and it is the ground and basis for all other action in worship. Understanding worship as a dialogue can obscure this important reality when the emphasis is misplaced. Instead, a biblically faithful definition of worship must present God as both the sole object and primary subject of worship, taking the central role in both the revelation and response of the church's worship.

A second weakness of understanding worship as a dialogue stems from the first. Worship-as-dialogue can fail to appropriately grasp the basis of the relationship between God and his people, and thus it has a tendency to misplace the significance of Christ's role in Christian worship. Proponents of understanding worship as dialogue have highlighted Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:10-22 as "perhaps the best illustration" of the conversation between God and humanity that occurs in worship.[18] As Jacob journeys

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[16] Schwöbel, "Creature of the Word," 119.

[17] Schwöbel, "Creature of the Word," 119.

[18] Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 121; see also Winward, *Reformation of Our Worship*, 16; William Nicholls, *Jacob's Ladder: The Meaning of Worship*, Ecumenical Studies in Worship (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1958).

toward Haran, he falls asleep and dreams that "there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!" (Gen 28:12). Rayburn describes the scene's unfolding action:

> The Lord, standing above the ladder was the first to speak. He always takes the initiative in worship. He promised to make Jacob and his descendants the heirs to His special covenant promises given to Abraham. . . . Jacob's response to these words came when he awoke. It was not only a verbal response in which he expressed reverential fear; it was also a response of action.[19]

The two-beat rhythm of revelation and response can be clearly discerned. Winward writes that this dream "is a vision of the two-way communication which is always taking place between God and men," going on to say that here "divine revelation, seen and heard, vision and message, elicits a response in which emotion, word, and action are combined."[20] Jacob's encounter with God at Bethel provides a picture of how God deals with humanity, one which Rayburn and Winward argue should be understood as dialogue and should be determinative for the shape of Christian worship.

Proponents for worship-as-dialogue are careful to demonstrate that Jacob's experience does more than merely facilitate a dialogical understanding of worship; it also points to a more significant reality seen in Jesus Christ. At the end of John 1, Jesus calls Nathanael to be his disciple, describing him as "an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" (John 1:47).[21] After Nathanael recognizes Jesus to be the Son of God, Jesus declares to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). While Jesus makes no explicit mention of the ladder or of Jacob, he clearly expresses a relationship between

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[19] Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 122.

[20] Winward, *Reformation of Our Worship*, 16–17.

[21] This description of Nathanael offers a sharp contrast to the descriptions of Jacob as "the deceiver" in Gen 25:24-34 and 27:18-25 prior to his encounter with God at Bethel. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 160–61.

Jacob's vision in Genesis 28 and himself.[22] Martin describes Jesus as the ladder "who as 'Son of man' mediates the true worship of God and conducts the traffic between God and man."[23] Winward concludes that this passage points to Jesus as the one through whom the dialogue of worship takes place.[24] According to Rayburn, Jesus is saying that "communication with God was to be obtained only through His own person."[25] Whether as the director of traffic or the facilitator of conversation, worship-as-dialogue prioritizes Christ as a type of conduit through whom worship takes place between God and humanity.[26]

While the point that Martin, Winward, and Rayburn present is right and good, arguing that dialogue is the norm for understanding worship and that Jesus is the conduit for the church's worship seems to obscure the emphasis of Genesis 28 and John 1:51. Rather than describing the conversation of worship, Jesus's superseding of Jacob and his ladder articulates the central role of Christ in presenting the grace and goodness of God to his chosen people. The rich image of the glory of Jesus Christ given in John 1 refers "much more to the continuing—and from now on intermittently visible—glory present in

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[22] While Ridderbos argues that Jesus is drawing a parallel between the ladder and himself, based on the ambiguity of the Hebrew in Gen 28:12 (whether the angels are descending "on him" meaning Jacob or "on it" meaning the ladder), Carson argues that Jesus means to compare himself to Jacob. Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 94; Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 163–64. If Carson is correct in his interpretation, then instead of being a better ladder, more significantly Jesus is the new Israel that supersedes Jacob.

[23] Martin, *The Worship of God*, 217.

[24] Winward, *Reformation of Our Worship*, 31.

[25] Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 122.

[26] The idea of Jesus as conduit, or "the link between heaven and earth" as Leon Morris writes, is an important implication of this passage. Morris continues, "He is the means by which the realities of heaven are brought down to earth." Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (1971; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 149. Winward lands in a similar place: "It is through [Jesus] that the descending and ascending movements in Christian worship take place. God approaches us, and we approach God, through Christ." Winward, *Reformation of Our Worship*, 31.

Jesus' self-revelation in words and works and in his constant communion with the Father."[27] This image manifests the revelation of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Edward Klink comments, "Jesus is heaven open."[28] It is what Calvin describes as Jesus uniting himself to believers by taking on human flesh that he might unite them to himself in order to "share with [them] what he has received from the Father."[29] This idea brings the believer's spiritual union with Christ to the foreground. It highlights the reality that the gift of worship is an expression of entering into the Son's relationship with the Father by the Spirit. It is distinctly trinitarian and at every point grounded in who the believer now is in Christ, for there is only "one mediator between God and men" for salvation (1 Tim 2:5), and the same holds true for worship and the whole Christian life. John Webster writes,

> In Christ God unites himself to us; but he does so only in this one person, and this one person is not the symbol of some more general communion or identity. He is the one mediator; he alone is the place of union between God and creatures. But what kind of union? It is a union in which he elects to share with us the benefits of fellowship with God.[30]

The Christian's only hope of entering into the grace of God is by being chosen in Christ and abiding in him. It is in receiving the "benefits of fellowship with God" in Jesus Christ.[31] An understanding of worship in light of union with Christ sees him as the one *through* whom and *in* whom worship takes place.

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[27] Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 94.

[28] Commenting on John 1:51, Klink explains, "What is unique about Jesus is not only his sonship or that he is God or intimate with the Father, but also that he provides for some to 'see' God. . . . This emphatic statement declares that Jesus is (and always was) the opening of heaven." Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 154.

[29] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (1960; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 3.1.1.

[30] John Webster, "On Evangelical Ecclesiology," in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2005), 173.

[31] Webster, "On Evangelical Ecclesiology," 173.

In summary, these two weaknesses of worship-as-dialogue obscure both the fundamental asymmetry between God's action and the church's action, and also the role of Christ as the one *in whom* Christian worship takes place. As an approach to understanding corporate worship, worship-as-dialogue is susceptible to creating a false dichotomy between God's revelation and the church's response in corporate worship. This leads to an understanding of worship that minimizes the role of Christ by seeing him only as the one through whom worship takes place, rather than the one in whom every act of faith occurs and in whom every grace is received. While the rhythm of revelation and response states something true of worship, it does not say enough. A better understanding of corporate worship emphasizes the distinct and continuous activity of God in the church's worship and the church's action of attesting to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit.

**Worship through and in Christ**

John 4 is a better foundation for understanding corporate worship, presenting a conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. Kevin Vanhoozer remarks that this passage "in many respects does seem to represent the final word on right worship."[32] While Jesus is sitting beside Jacob's well, a Samaritan woman comes to draw water and Jesus asks her to give him a drink.[33] A conversation ensues, with Jesus telling her that he has living water that leads to eternal life (John 4:10-15). After Jesus exposes her sin, the Samaritan woman begins to seriously consider who Jesus might be (vv. 16-18). So she tests him by asking him to speak to the most important religious dispute of her day: where is the true place of worship?[34] Jesus answers in stunning fashion by telling her that

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[32] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Worship at the Well: From Dogmatics to Doxology (And Back Again)," *Trinity Journal* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 3.

[33] Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 229.

[34] The Samaritan woman's question about the place of worship is not a diversion to deflect attention away from her own iniquity, but is a necessary and vital point of theological contention between

the dispute over Mount Gerizim and Jerusalem has been made obsolete, for the salvation which has come from the Jews is found in him. He declares, "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" (v. 23). D. A. Carson writes that this worship—true worship—"can take place only in and through him: he is the true temple (2:19-22), he is the resurrection and the life (11:25)."[35]

All Christian worship is not only *through* Jesus, as understanding worship as a dialogue emphasizes. It is also *in* Jesus. What Christ describes as true worship—worship "in spirit and truth"—does not describe two distinct components but is instead a hendiadys that cannot be separated. "Spirit and truth" belong together in describing worship.[36] Herman Ridderbos explains that this phrase expresses God's "new way" to relate to humanity through Christ.[37] To worship "in spirit and truth" is to enjoy "the fellowship established in its life-creating and life-giving power" that leads to partaking of "the fullness of God's gifts" and to enter by the Spirit into the fellowship the Father shares with his Son.[38] It is a participation in Christ through the Spirit. As Vanhoozer articulates, "It is Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that makes possible the sending of the Spirit, who, in uniting us to the Son, draws us into God's triune life and enables us to

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Samaritans and Jews. In this way, the conversation that began with Jesus' offer of living water can move forward. See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 221–22; Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 161–62; Klink, *John*, 242–43.

[35] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 224.

[36] Klink writes, "The preposition 'in' governs both nouns; they are not two separate characteristics of appropriate worship. The conjunction 'and' is not functionally epexegetically (i.e., 'that is') but is simply a connective conjunction. Thus, the two nouns must be taken together to make sense of the phrase." Klink, *John*, 245; see also Carson, who writes, "These are not two separable characteristics of the worship that must be offered: it must be 'in spirit and truth,' i.e. essentially God-centered, made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and in personal knowledge of and conformity to God's Word-made-flesh, the one who is God's 'truth,' the faithful exposition and fulfillment of God and his saving purposes." Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 225.

[37] Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 163–64.

[38] Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 163–64.

worship in spirit and in truth."[39] Jesus comes as the truth (John 14:6) and the Spirit draws believers into that truth (John 14:17). God has sent "the Spirit of his Son into our hearts" so that his people can now call him "Father!" (Gal 4:6). By being united to the Son, believers can engage in true worship of God.

The revelation of Jesus Christ displays God's intention to seek worshipers who find their life in him. This is the place of true worship. William Barcley writes, "Because God has acted 'in Christ,' believers now live in him. As the locus of God's gracious activity, Christ provides and, in a sense, becomes the 'space' in which believers act and exist."[40] It is in Christ that a person receives a new identity and status (see Rom 7:5; Gal 1:13-14; Rom 6:1-2, 6; 8:1). Because Christians are united to Christ, they are to worship in spirit and truth. Thus, *who* one is should determine *how* one worships. And the Father seeks worshipers who find their life in his Son by the Spirit. With this foundation of understanding worship in spirit and truth as worship in Christ, I move toward articulating a working definition of corporate worship that is driven by the true nature of the church.

## Defining Corporate Worship

The true worship that takes place in spirit and truth has implications for how the church understands corporate worship. Far from being "a charter for individuals to worship in private," worship in spirit and truth recognizes that "the Father is creating a new temple in the form of a new people: the body of Christ."[41] While worship

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[39] Vanhoozer, "Worship at the Well," 15. Graham Cole writes, "The Father is approached through the Son by the Spirit. In this way we worship the Father in spirit and in truth (John 4:24): in 'spirit' because we need to approach God, who is spirit, in a way that is in keeping with his nature; and in 'truth' because without the self-disclosure of God in Christ our prayers are blind." Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 236.

[40] William B. Barcley, *"Christ In You": A Study in Paul's Theology and Ethics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 108.

[41] Vanhoozer, "Worship at the Well," 11.

encompasses all of life and is the very thing humanity is made to do, it is comprised of the everyday thought, conduct, and emotion of the believer both as an individual but especially as a member of God's covenant people.[42] Accordingly, the church's identity in Christ must shape the church's activity in corporate worship. This is my argument in chapter 2: who the church *is* should be determinative of what it *does* as it gathers in worship. This is further demonstrated by looking at Calvin's understanding and practice of corporate worship. Now, I explain my working definition of corporate worship that brings identity to bear on understanding worship. Corporate worship is God's Spirit-enabled and Word-governed gift, initiated by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, for his covenant people to gratefully assemble in space and time to witness to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit through proclamation, prayer, singing, and the sacraments as they receive from Christ, act in him, and long for him to come again.

**Defining Worship in Light of the Nature of the Church**

If identity is determinative of practice, then the distinctive nature of the church—that which makes the church the *church*—should be accounted for when discussing its own worship. Gregg Allison argues that the identity of the church consists of seven characteristics:

> The church is (1) *doxological*, or oriented to the glory of God; (2) *logocentric*, or focused on the Word of God, understood to refer to Jesus Christ the incarnate Word and Scripture the inspired Word; (3) *pneumadynamic*, or created, gathered, gifted, and empowered by the Holy Spirit; (4) *covenantal*, or gathered as members in (new) covenant relationship with God and in covenant relationship with each other; (5) *confessional*, or united by both personal confession of faith in Christ and common confession of the historic Christian faith; (6) *missional*, or identified as the body of divinely called and divinely sent ministers to proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God; and (7) *spatio-temporal/eschatological*, or assembled as a historical reality (located in space and time) and possessing a certain hope and clear

[42] Harold Best defines worship as "the continuous outpouring of all that I am, all that I do and all that I can ever become in light of a chosen or choosing god." He goes on to argue that "because God is the Continuous Outpourer, we bear his image as continuous outpourers." Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (IVP Books, 2003), 18, 23.

destiny while it lives the strangeness of ecclesial existence in the here-and-now.[43] The church's understanding of corporate worship should give evidence of these seven characteristics. In other words, the church's worship, both its definition and practice, should be shaped by these seven marks.

But a survey of definitions of worship rarely take the breadth of the nature of the church into account. For example, Daniel Block defines worship as involving "reverential human acts of submission and homage before the divine Sovereign in response to his gracious revelation of himself and in accord with his will."[44] This definition evidences a few of the characteristics Allison cites. It is clearly doxological as worship involves "reverential human acts." Out of reverence for God, his people act in such a way as to bring him glory. It is also logocentric in that it is a response, according to the will of God, to God's revelation of himself. God's revelation and guidelines for worship are seen primarily in the person and work of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture. In addition to being doxological and logocentric, one might also argue that Block's definition is somewhat missional to the extent that a proclamation of the gospel and the advancement of God's kingdom are included in these human acts of homage and submission. But this definition does not give evidence of the pneumadynamic reality of the church's worship, nor the covenantal nature of the relationship between God and his worshippers. It does not speak to the identity of the people of God in Christ.

Other people highlight a few more characteristics of the church in their definitions of worship. For example, David Peterson offers the following: "Worship of

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[43] Allison describes the first three characteristics as relating to the "origin and orientation" of the church, while the other four concern the church's "gathering and sending." Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 103.

[44] Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 29. Compare this definition with Ralph Martin's: "[Worship is] the dramatic celebration of God in his supreme worship in such a manner that his 'worthiness' becomes the norm and inspiration of human living." Martin, *The Worship of God*, 4. Martin emphasizes the doxological and missional aspects of Christian worship, but does nothing in this definition to describe the possibility or terms of this worship.

the living and true God is essentially an engagement with him on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible."[45] While Peterson's definition is noticeably less doxological than Block's, by highlighting the terms and possibility of worship that God enables, Peterson implicitly reflects the logocentric and pneumadynamic nature of Christian worship.[46] One could also argue that Peterson takes into account the covenantal dynamics of worship, since God makes engagement possible and sets forth the terms for engaging with him. However, further analysis shows that this definition seems to neglect the confessional, missional, and eschatological nature of Christian worship.

One further definition goes beyond these other examples by exhibiting an inclusion of the seven characteristics detailed by Allison. While it runs the risk of being cumbersome, it is still helpful in its comprehensiveness. D. A. Carson writes,

> *Worship* is the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God, ascribing all honor and worth to their Creator-God precisely because he is worthy, delightfully so. This side of the Fall, *human worship* of God properly responds to the redemptive provisions that God has graciously made. While all true worship is God-centered, *Christian worship* is no less Christ-centered. Empowered by the Spirit and in line with the stipulations of the new covenant, it manifests itself in all our living, finding its impulse in the gospel, which restores our relationship with our Redeemer-God and therefore also with our fellow image-bearers, our co-worshipers. Such worship therefore manifests itself both in adoration and in action, both in the individual believer and in *corporate worship*, which is worship offered up in the context of the body of believers, who strive to align all the forms of their devout ascription of all worth to God with the panoply of new covenant mandates and examples that bring to fulfillment the glories of antecedent revelation and anticipate the consummation.[47]

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[45] David G. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 20.

[46] Peterson makes this reflection explicit throughout his work as he discusses the biblical basis for and possibility of worship. See Peterson, *Engaging with God*. Compare this definition with John Frame, who writes, "Worship is the work of acknowledging the greatness of our covenant Lord." John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 1. This definition is clearly doxological and covenantal, but does little to describe the logocentric and pneumadynamic realities of Christian worship.

[47] D. A. Carson, "Worship under the Word," in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand

Each characteristic is evident to a varying extent. This definition is doxological ("ascribing all honor and worth"), logocentric ("Christ-centered . . . in line with the stipulations of the new covenant . . . finding its impulse in the gospel"), pneumadynamic ("empowered by the Spirit"), covenantal ("restores our relationship with our Redeemer-God and therefore also with our fellow image-bearers"), confessional ("align all the forms of their devout ascription of all worth to God with the panoply of new covenant mandates and examples"), missional ("manifests itself . . . in all our living," ascribing "all worth to God"), and spatio-temporal/eschatological ("offered up in the context of the body of believers . . . [with practices] that bring to fulfillment the glories of antecedent revelation and anticipate the consummation").

While Carson's definition is both comprehensive and beneficial, in addition to its complex syntax, its lack of emphasis on spiritual union with Christ leaves the logocentric nature of Christian worship somewhat underdeveloped. When this aspect of the church's worship is minimized, the church and its worshippers are left susceptible to understanding worship as primarily a product of their own being and activity, not something that takes place in Christ. This is problematic because even though the Spirit's empowerment in worship is acknowledged, it is primarily understood as that which helps and strengthens people in their worship without conveying that all Christian acts of worship take place in Christ. If this functional belief goes unchecked, a problem arises: worship is focused on the self, on the worshiper. Macaskill similarly describes Christian morality when approached this way: "It is, in reality, *self*-centered: we can talk about being 'Christlike' or about 'relying on the power of the Spirit' but still think about this as something *we* do."[48] This understanding of Christian worship neglects the vital

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Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 26.

[48] Macaskill, preface to *Living in Union with Christ*, viii.

significance of what it means to be united to Christ.[49]

The existence and reality of the church, and by extension its worship, cannot be understood or practiced apart from being oriented to the reality of Jesus Christ.[50] In particular, the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ are definitive for the identity of the church, and accordingly for its understanding and practice of worship.[51] This is not to be understood apart from the empowerment of the Spirit, but is to be taken in conjunction with it.[52] In light of the union Christians have with Christ, made possible by the Spirit, corporate worship should be understood as God's Spirit-enabled and Word-governed gift, initiated by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, for his covenant people to gratefully assemble in space and time to witness to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit through proclamation, prayer, singing, and the sacraments as they receive from Christ, act in him, and long for him to come again. This definition articulates each of the

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[49] This is similar to the J. B. Torrance's argument presented in chap. 1, that the church's worship is often functionally unitarian. Elsewhere Torrance describes this deficient view: "The commonest and most widespread [view of worship] is that worship is something which we do—mainly in Church on Sunday. We go to Church, we sing our psalms to God, we intercede for Northern Ireland or the Middle East, we listen to the sermon (too often simply an exhortation), we offer our money, time, and talents to God. No doubt we need God's grace to help us do it; we do it because Jesus taught us to do it and left us an example to show us how to do it. But worship is what WE do." James B. Torrance, "Christ in Our Place: The Joy of Worship," in *A Passion for Christ: The Vision that Ignites Ministry*, ed. Gerrit Dawson and Jock Stein (1999; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 36.

[50] Campbell writes, "Virtually every aspect of the Christian life is informed in some way by a believer's union with Christ. The status and identity that believers enjoy, which is so programmatic for Paul's ethical framework and instruction, are inextricably bound up with union with Christ. From there flow the activities and characteristics of believers, which again are entwined with union with Christ. The Christian life is so weaved of the fabric of union with Christ that the most appropriate moniker for believers is 'in Christ.'" Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 375.

[51] For discussion of the importance of Christ's death and resurrection in giving shape to Christian doctrine and practice, see Robert C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology* (1967; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); Ned Wisnefske, "Living and Dying with Christ: Do We Mean What We Say?," *Word and World* 10 (1990): 254–59; Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

[52] Allison writes of the church, "Because its very existence is due to the triune God and his salvific work through Jesus Christ the Son and in the Holy Spirit, the church directs itself to the glory of God while focusing on the Word of God, always empowered by the Spirit of God." Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 103–4.

seven characteristics of the church presented by Allison, while also giving attention to the vital importance of union with Christ in the church's worship, as explained below.[53] Additionally, it establishes the rhythm of worship as one of *Word and witness*, rather than one of *revelation and response*.[54] The remainder of this chapter gives attention to the first half of this definition that addresses the *who* questions of corporate worship.

**Corporate Worship is God's Gift**

In the first place, corporate worship is a gift that God gives to his people, the church. This means that the answer to the question, "Who does worship belong to?" begins with God—it is his gift to give. Worship as a gift from God is an aspect of worship that is all too easy to neglect. In fact, of the dozens of definitions of worship surveyed for this study, only two speak of worship as gift. The first comes from Welton Gaddy, who features this idea prominently in *The Gift of Worship*.[55] However, while Gaddy does describe the opportunity of worship as God's gift, his emphasis is decidedly on worship as a gift the church offers to God, "a love gift to the love-giving God."[56] While worship as a gift or offering is an appropriate and important category, and one that I address in the next chapter, it is not the primary category for the church's worship. Instead, the church's worship is first a gift from God to his people.

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[53] It is (1) doxological because it is for God's glory; (2) logocentric because it is Word-governed, initiated by Christ, and taking place in Christ; (3) pneumadynamic being Spirit-enabled; (4) covenantal as it is a gift to God's chosen people; (5) confessional; (6) missional as God's people gather to witness to the worth and work of God in Jesus Christ as they receive from, act in, and long for Christ; and (7) spatio-temporal/eschatological as God's people assemble in space and time to be oriented to their true reality as they long for Christ's return.

[54] The rhythm of "Word and witness" in corporate worship will be further addressed in chap. 5.

[55] C. Welton Gaddy, *The Gift of Worship* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992).

[56] Gaddy, preface to *Gift of Worship*, xi. Gaddy writes that "the opportunity (privilege) to worship God is itself a gift from God and specific acts of worship are prompted by the gifts from God—spiritual and material. Conversely, the worship of God consists of offering gifts to God. Since worship is a gift from God to us and since worship involves gifts from us to God, the focus of this volume is on the gifts of Christian worship" (xv).

Contrary to Gaddy, the second definition that speaks of worship as a gift effectively highlights the role of union with Christ. J. B. Torrance describes worship as "the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father."[57] This concept of worship as God's gift sheds light on the importance of union with Christ in the church's understanding of worship. In chapter 3, I discuss Calvin's theological vision in which all the goodness of God flows to the believer through the blessing of being united to Jesus. It is through union with Christ that the Christian experiences the grace of God.[58] All the blessings the believer receives flow from being united to Christ, including calling (1 Cor 7:22), justification (Gal 2:17), sanctification (1 Cor 1:2), redemption (1 Cor 1:30), freedom (Gal 2:4), and life (1 Cor 15:22).[59] Worship is one of those gifts and can only take place through the spiritual union that makes worship in spirit and truth possible.

Additionally, corporate worship is a gift from God to his people because in it he gives them a taste of his relational presence.[60] The life, joy, pleasure, and purpose found in the presence of God as his people gather represents God's intervention on earth.[61] As the church gathers it is given a glimpse of divine glory, a picture of the joy of life in God and with God. Collectively, the assembled believers sing of his goodness, taste of his kindness, see his redemption, and hear his voice in his Word. This theme is prominent in the book of Psalms. For example, Psalm 21:6 proclaims, "You make him

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[57] James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 20–21; see also Torrance, "Christ in Our Place," 36.

[58] See Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

[59] For a helpful discussion on the benefits believers receive from being in Christ, see Barcley, *Christ in You*, 109–10.

[60] Lister provides a thorough discussion of God's relational presence throughout his work, but particularly in John Ryan Lister, "'The Lord Your God Is in Your Midst': The Presence of God and the Means and End of Redemptive History" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 34–38.

[61] See Lister, "God in Your Midst," 355–59.

glad with the joy of your presence." In Psalm 140:13, David pronounces, "Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall dwell in your presence" (also see Ps 41:12). This verse points to the necessity of being united to Christ in order to experience the joy of God's relational presence, because a sinner cannot be called righteous apart from receiving Christ's righteousness. There is no other way to dwell in the presence of God. But in Christ, David's declaration in Psalm 16:11 is fulfilled: "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

The psalter also affirms the reality that God hears the cries of his people. This gives further evidence of the gift of corporate worship. His people do not gather merely hoping that through their songs and prayers God might hear and respond like the prophets of Baal who cry out that their god might answer them but receive no reply (1 Kgs 18:26). On the contrary, when God's people cry out, he hears and responds (Ps 34:15; 1 Pet 3:12). Those united to Christ are confident that, because they are now counted righteous and heirs with him, God regards their gathered worship with pleasure (Heb 10:19-23).[62]

**A Spirit-Enabled Gift**

If corporate worship is a gift of God, then only the Holy Spirit can distribute this gift, and thus the church's worship is enabled by the Spirit.[63] While Christian worship always takes place in Christ, the church's worship can only happen "by the Spirit of God" (Phil 3:3). Who enables the church's worship? God the Holy Spirit. Basil of Caesarea declares, "It is impossible to worship the Son except in the Holy Spirit; it is impossible to

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[62] For further discussion on God receiving the church's worship favorably, see Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship*, 107–25.

[63] See also Cole, who writes, "The Holy Spirit is the one who sovereignly distributes the gifts of God." Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 71–72. Ross states, "Nothing divine can happen without the Holy Spirit being the one who enables it to happen—Creation, redemption, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, or communion with God in worship." Allen Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 421.

call upon the Father except in the Spirit of adoption."[64] Fundamental to the church's understanding of corporate worship is the reality that it is only possible through the Holy Spirit, because it is the Spirit that brings believers into spiritual union with Christ. The Spirit is the one who creates, gathers, gifts, and empowers the church in all things, including worship.[65]

The doctrine of union with Christ emphatically highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. In fact, this is exactly what is at the heart of the New Testament imagery used for the church. Paul describes how God has provided Jesus Christ as the head of the church, his body, which is filled by Christ (Eph 1:22-23). By giving himself to the church, God gives his very presence to his people. Paul goes on to speak of the church as "members of the household of God" with this house being built on Jesus Christ, the cornerstone, through whom the house of God "grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph 2:19-21). Macaskill remarks that this filling up of the body of Christ, the holy temple, "is actualized by the Spirit."[66] Christ fills the church through the Spirit and as a result of this indwelling, the church is "being built together into a dwelling place for God" (Eph 2:22; cf. 1 Cor 12:13). As the church is built up in the Spirit "each [believer] is lifted above individual particularity in order, 'in Christ,' to form with all other believers the fellowship of the church."[67]

Additionally, Macaskill highlights that for Paul it was "the role of the Spirit" that is the "actualization of the mediatorial work of Christ."[68] The Spirit acts as the bond

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[64] Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Stephen Hildebrand (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 48.

[65] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 117.

[66] Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 151.

[67] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 3:12–13.

[68] Macaskill, *Union with Christ*, 151.

the people of God have with Christ. The church is sealed with the Holy Spirit who acts as the guarantee that, at the return of Christ, the presence and blessing of God will be fully known (Eph 1:13-14). It is only by the Spirit that the union between Christ and the church is possible; therefore, it is only by the Spirit that the church can offer acceptable worship to God.

While the Holy Spirit's work is never limited to corporate worship, the Spirit is perpetually empowering the church's worship.[69] Among the Spirit's works are bringing conviction (John 16:8-11), new life (Titus 3:5-6), freedom (2 Cor 3:17), unity (Eph 4:1-6), and speaking through God's Word (Heb 3:7, 10:15). In the church's worship, the Spirit specifically enables Christian singing (Eph 5:18-19) and guides the church's prayer (Rom 8:26; Eph 6:18); the Spirit empowers preaching[70] and brings understanding (1 Cor 2:10; 1 Pet 1:22).[71] The Spirit works to bear witness to Christ (John 15:26). This knowledge of Christ enables worship in spirit and truth.[72] Torrance explains, "The Spirit does not speak of Himself. He takes of the things of Christ. He glorifies Christ. He brings Christ to our remembrance."[73] The only means to confess "Jesus is Lord" occurs through the Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). Rayburn writes, "Christian worship is actually a work of God in and through the believing community gathered unto Him. He glorifies His own name

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[69] "[The] corporate worship of God is made possible by the Holy Spirit." Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, ed. David S. Dockery, Nathan A. Finn, and Christopher W. Morgan, Theology for the People of God (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2020), 446.

[70] For detailed discussion of this point see Ralph Cunnington, *Preaching with Spiritual Power: Calvin's Understanding of Word and Spirit in Preaching* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2015); John Piper, *Expository Exultation: Christian Preaching as Worship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 99–122.

[71] For further discussion, see Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 446–55.

[72] Thompson contends from John 2-4 that "the broader literary context of the Gospel strongly suggests that 'in spirit and truth' points to the truth put into effect by the Holy Spirit." She goes on to say that the narratives of Jesus with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman "point the reader away from the human being as self-sufficient actor to the human being as recipient of the activity and Spirit of God." Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 214–15.

[73] James B. Torrance, "The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship," in *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 368.

among the people in the midst of whom He dwells."[74] By indwelling his people by the Spirit, the triune God enables the exaltation of his name.

The Spirit's presence underscores the Trinitarian nature of Christian worship. Von Allmen comments, "The whole service is taking place in the presence, under the authority, and with the power of the Holy Trinity."[75] The triune God manifests his presence with his people through this indwelling of the Spirit (John 14:16-20).[76] Corporate worship is a gift from the Father through the Son enabled by the Holy Spirit. Colin Gunton writes, "The first and last thing we have to say about God the Trinity is that he is a God who enables us to worship him. In worship, we are truly brought to the Father through the Son and in the Spirit as we hear the word, break the bread and are enabled to respond in prayer and praise."[77] Corporate worship truly is God's Spirit-enabled gift to the church.

**A Word-Governed Gift**

The church's corporate worship is not only Spirit-enabled, it is also Word-governed. In his conversation at the well, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, "You worship what you do not know" (John 4:22). His statement confronts the partial knowledge of God in Samaritan worship. Vanhoozer notes that the Samaritans "did not know enough to worship him correctly. . . . All of our pious intentions are struck by this thunderbolt, by this thought that we cannot help but worship falsely *unless we are guided by God's Word*."[78] The Jews, in contrast to the Samaritans, worshiped what was made known to

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[74] Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 109.

[75] Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 139.

[76] For further discussion see Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 291–94.

[77] Colin E. Gunton, *Theology through Preaching: The Gospel and the Christian Life* (2001; repr., London: T & T Clark, 2005), 60.

[78] Vanhoozer, "Worship at the Well," 8.

them (John 4:22). True worship can only take place if governed by the revelation of God made known in his Word.[79] God alone provides direction and governs the worship of his people, and in this way the church's worship is both logocentric and confessional as it gives authority to the shared faith of the church (Jude 3). For the church's corporate worship to be Word-governed its parameters, content, and truth will be determined by the Word of God.

Because the church's worship is a gift of God, it follows that he determines the parameters for right worship. The only way the church can know how to please God is, as Peterson argues, through "his own self-revelation . . . . We cannot simply determine for ourselves what is honoring to him."[80] This idea was prominent in Calvin's thinking as seen in his tract "The Necessity of the Reformation."[81] Calvin sounds strong warnings against the danger of "fictitious worship" that "is devised by human reason" and "delights us" in its "show of wisdom."[82] He continues, "When we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray. And then . . . there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions."[83] In order to guard God's gift of worship, the church's worship must be governed by the Word of God. Again, Calvin is very clear on this point. The church must "look to the injunctions of Him who alone is entitled to prescribe" and be Word-governed in its worship. By doing so, the church protects itself

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[79] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 223.

[80] Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 19.

[81] John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church, Presented to The Imperial Diet at Spires, A. D. 1544, in the Name of All Who Wish Christ to Reign," in *Tracts and Letters of John Calvin*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1844; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 1:121–234.

[82] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:153.

[83] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:128.

and recognizes God's authority over and against humanity's propensity to go its own way.[84]

For the church's worship to be Word-governed, its content must be determined by this Word. In his letter to the church at Colossae, Paul calls on the church to "let the word of Christ dwell in [them] richly" (Col 3:16), emphasizing that Christ's word—that which is both *from* him and *about* him—should be the heartbeat of God's people as they gather in worship.[85] When Jesus began his earthly ministry, he stood in the synagogue and read the words of Isaiah 61:1-2: "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" (Luke 4:18-19). Similarly, Paul writes in Ephesians 2:17 that Jesus "came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near." But this message of salvation proclaimed by Jesus Christ is not only *from* him—it is *about* him as well. Jesus is both the messenger and the message. Therefore, Paul delivers what he has received "as of first importance" (1 Cor 15:3), and sees it as his task to "know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2).[86] Jesus, the Word made flesh (John 1:14), determines the content of the church's worship, giving life to the church through his words and work. Accordingly, to

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[84] Calvin, "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 1:128.

[85] Beale suggests that the "word of Christ" in Col 3:16 "could be either a subjective or objective genitive, and it may be best not to try to specify one over the other here. Both the subjective and objective genitives may be packed into the genitive construction, conveying an intentional ambiguity." G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 302; see also Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 290.

[86] Expressing an objective genitive understanding of "word of Christ," Bob Kauflin writes, "The gospel is not merely one of many possible themes we can touch on as we come to worship God. It is the central and foundational theme. All our worship originates and is brought into focus at the cross of Jesus Christ." Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 72.

be Word-governed is to allow this Word to determine the content of the church's corporate worship.

In addition to determining the parameters and content of the church's worship, God's Word also defines truth for the worshipping church. Jesus Christ comes as "the truth" (John 14:6) who defines true reality. For the church, corporate worship functions as a weekly reorientation to the truth. Gathered worship presents a recalibration to the Word away from the de-orientation brought on by the world, the flesh, and the devil (Heb 3:12-14; 1 Pet 5:8). The world that the church navigates exerts a constant pressure to proclaim content characterized by a different path to salvation. For example, the church is pressured by the wellness movement to proclaim the life to be found in good health.[87] It is pressured by the sexual revolutionaries to declare a message of acceptance and love.[88] But these alternate realities, and countless others, are only faint expressions of the ultimate reality of Christ. He is the righteous one who gives his people significance in himself (Gal 4:7). He is the loving one who lays down his life for others (John 15:13). He is the just one who comes to bring peace and restoration to all things (Isa 9:6-7). The content of the church's worship must always be marked by the reality of Jesus Christ, for it is in him alone the church has life, in him alone the church can come to God, in him alone the church can worship. While there are many other messages that clamor for the attention of the church, when the church's worship is in Christ there is only one message worth declaring: "All we have is Christ." Accordingly, the church's worship must be always governed by God's Word.

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[87] See Vanhoozer's discussion of the North American social imaginary in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 16–41.

[88] For a historical perspective on the sexual revolution's impact on American Christianity, see R. Marie Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

**A Gift Initiated by God's Gracious Revelation in Christ**

The God of the Bible is infinitely beyond humanity's ability to know and worship apart from God's revelation of himself. Herman Bavinck writes, "The distance between God and us is the gulf between the Infinite and the finite, between eternity and time, between being and becoming, between the All and the nothing."[89] But even as Scripture holds forth God's majestic transcendence, it also affirms that God can be known.[90] Before the church can respond in worship, God must make himself known. God does this in Christ, the "Word made flesh" (John 1:14). It is this revelation that enables the possibility of worship: it is a knowledge initiated by God in Jesus Christ and illuminated by the Spirit (i.e., Spirit-enabled).

An understanding of the church's corporate worship begins with the preceding reality of God's gracious revelation in Christ by the Spirit. Vanhoozer explains,

> We know God only when and where God gives himself to be known. . . . Those who do not know the Son cannot know the Father. Yes, God is incomprehensible, yet at the same time the incomprehensible one has made himself known in Jesus Christ. Knowing Jesus Christ—the locus of God's fullest self-revelation—is thus the condition for right worship.[91]

Jesus comes as the revelation of God for the church, through whom and in whom the church worships. While no one can see God and live (Exod 33:20, John 1:18), God has revealed himself in Jesus, the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), the "radiance of the glory of God and exact imprint of his nature" (Heb 1:3). Apart from his gracious appearing humanity has no hope of knowing and worshiping God. But the believer finds life by being found in him (Phil 3:7-11). Christ came so that those who were once slaves

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[89] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 30.

[90] See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:29–31.

[91] Vanhoozer, "Worship at the Well," 9.

could become children of the Father, heirs through God (Gal 4:4-7). He is the one who comes as revelation and initiates all Christian worship.

God's special revelation toward his people is seen in Christ alone and effective by the Spirit alone. John Owen describes Jesus as the one who "acts and animates" God's revelation, since "all the treasures of truth, wisdom, and knowledge may be well said to be in him."[92] Similarly, Bavinck writes, "The whole of revelation, summed up in Scripture, is a special revelation that comes to us in Christ. Christ is the center and content of that whole special revelation."[93] He goes on to describe Jesus as the very "source of prophecy" which renders Christ "the supreme, the unique and true prophet" and the "full and complete revelation of God."[94] Jesus, as the revelation of God, is the initiator of Christian worship since the church cannot worship what it does not know (John 4:22).

The Spirit effects his ministry by making known Jesus Christ as God's revelation (John 16:13-15). It is through the Spirit-breathed Scripture, the word about Christ, that the Spirit bears witness to the Son, showing him as the one who is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God comes to dwell among humanity in order to disclose his truth, in order to be revelation. "The presence of God in the world, in Christ the tabernacle, is understood as the presence of truth and, hence, as revelation," writes Macaskill.[95] Jesus Christ is the great revealer of God, coming to shine light in dark places (Isa 9:2; Luke 1:79; John 1:4-5, 12:46) and to open the eyes of the blind (Isa 32:3, 42:7, 49:9). He says, "Whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (John 12:45). All reflection on

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[92] John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 1, *The Glory of Christ*, ed. William H. Goold (1850; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 1:83.

[93] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 321.

[94] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:335.

[95] Macaskill, *Union with Christ*, 174.

the person and work of Jesus must lead to worship since "the knowledge of God-in-Christ, after all, is life itself (Ps. 89:16; Isa. 11:9; Jer. 31:34; John 17:3)."[96] Corporate worship is a gift of God initiated in the revelation of Jesus Christ, bringing salvation to sinners as they are united to him.

**A Gift to God's Covenant People**

As a gift from God, corporate worship has a recipient: God's new covenant people. Covenant is the means through which God establishes relationship with humanity.[97] Consequently, Bavinck asserts that "covenant is the essence of true religion."[98] The basis for this claim is rooted in the impossible distance between humanity and God: "there is only difference, distance, endless distinctness."[99] Religion, relationship, and worship are not possible apart from God's coming to humanity through the revelation of Jesus Christ. In him the relationship between God and humanity is possible. The revelation of Christ is a covenantal action. Bavinck explains,

> For then God has to come down from his lofty position, condescend to his creatures, impart, reveal, and give himself away to human beings. . . . But this set of conditions is nothing other than the description of a covenant. . . . God is infinitely great and condescendingly good; he is Sovereign but also Father; he is Creator but also Prototype. In a word he is the God of the covenant.[100]

Covenant is vital to the church's worship because the church is a people who relate to God only through the new covenant.[101] Allen Ross begins his definition of

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[96] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:29.

[97] Allison writes, "In one sense, from the created order to human beings, every relationship in which God has been engaged has been structured according to some type of covenant." Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 64.

[98] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:569.

[99] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:569.

[100] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:569–70.

[101] Allison provides a helpful discussion of what it means for the church to be covenantal. He writes, "The church is covenantal, or gathered as members in (new) covenant relationship with God and in covenant relationship with each other" (123). Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 123–32.

worship, "True worship is the celebration of being in covenant fellowship with the sovereign and holy triune God."[102] It is a celebration because the church has been brought into covenant relationship with the sovereign and holy One. The prophets testify that to be the new covenant people of God, he must put his law within them and write it on their hearts (Jer 31:33). They are a people who are given a new heart and a new spirit, God's very own Spirit (Ezek 36:26-27). God makes this possible in the coming of the Messiah. As the God of covenant, he sends forth his Son "to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal 4:5) that they might be "a people for his own possession" (1 Pet 2:9), and in Christ be "built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph 2:22). This new covenant people are being "built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5). The identity and worship of this covenant people is found in Christ.

Union with Christ is a vital aspect of God establishing his new covenant people. Gaffin makes this connection clear: "The climactic realization of this covenantal bond between the triune God and the church is union with Christ, specifically, the exalted Christ."[103] By being united to Christ, the church experiences the blessing of a relationship with God and with one another. P. T. Forsyth writes, "To be in Christ is in the same act to be in the Church."[104] Through the Spirit's work, God joins believers to Christ and to his body, making them his covenant people (1 Cor 12:13). Corporate worship is then an important expression of this relationship. It is God's gift, enabled by the Spirit and governed by the Word, to those united in his Son.

One of the most helpful approaches to understanding corporate worship is to

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[102] Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 67.

[103] Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Union with Christ: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections," in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A. T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 272.

[104] P. T. Forsyth, *The Church, the Gospel, and Society* (London: Independent Press, 1962), 62.

understand the church's worship in terms of covenant and covenant renewal.[105] This view sees corporate worship as following the structure of the establishment of covenants, which begin with a call, include a response, and lead to communion.[106] While this idea does much to orient the church's understanding away from self, understanding worship in light of union with Christ brings the radical change of identity that has taken place in salvation into clearer focus. Being united to Christ orients individuals to God and to the church. Billings writes that "union with Christ centers Christian identity in Jesus Christ himself, and in the claim of the Triune God upon the Christian. . . . Individual believers discover their true identity in communion."[107] This communion takes place with God and with one another. While understanding covenant worship in terms of covenant renewal rightly emphasizes God's initiation of and action in worship, it can tend to underemphasize the church's active response in Christ.[108] Understanding worship in light of union with Christ emphasizes that the church both gathers to receive from Christ and

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[105] For the most thorough overview of the biblical support for and implications of this understanding, see Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003). Meyers writes, "The purpose of the Sunday service is covenant renewal. During corporate 'worship' the Lord renews His covenant with His people when He gathers them together and serves them" (33).

[106] Gibson provides an excellent overview of the importance of this structure to biblical worship. Jonathan Gibson, "Worship: On Earth as It Is in Heaven," in *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 2–22. He explains that this order was established in Eden, writing, "The call to worship came to Adam in the context of a covenant, in which life was promised to him and through him to all his descendants, upon the condition of his personal and perfect obedience. . . . [This call] was expected to elicit in Adam a response of faith and obedience, love and devotion, with heart and mind and strength. Adam's reward for such a response was to be a fellowship meal with God at the tree of life. Adam was commanded to fast from one tree in order that he might feast at another tree, and thus enjoy consummate union and communion with God—everlasting life. And so, for Adam and all his descendants, a liturgy was fixed, stitched into the very order and fabric of human life on earth: call—response—meal" (4).

[107] J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 9.

[108] This primarily manifests itself in a greater emphasis on celebrating the Lord's Supper at the expense of the preached Word and the church's expressed praise in song and prayer. While the intent of covenant renewal worship advocates, like Meyers, is to find better balance between Word and Supper, this understanding tends to deemphasize the importance of actively participating and responding to the grace of God in worship.

to act out its true identity in him.

## Conclusion

In summary, typical understandings of the church's corporate worship do not say enough. They seldom give priority to the distinct nature of the church as it finds its life in Christ and is indwelt by the Spirit. God the Father seeks those who worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23), and this is only possible by being joined to Christ. United to Christ, the church recognizes who it is and what it has received. It is then in a place to answer questions related to practice, such as the following: what does the church do in its gathered worship? Apart from this foundation rooted in union with Christ, the practice of corporate worship will always be skewed.

This chapter gave explicit attention to the *who* questions of corporate worship in order to highlight how worship should be understood in light of union with Christ. Who does worship belong to? As God's gift, the church's worship belongs to him. Who enables the church's worship, but the Spirit of God himself? Who makes worship possible? The possibility of the church's worship is only through the revelation of Jesus Christ. Who participates in corporate worship? God and his covenant people are the participants in the church's worship. Who are these covenant people? God's covenant people are those who find their lives in Christ by being united to him. The subsequent chapter further discusses my definition by giving attention to the *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* questions of corporate worship, which answers how corporate worship should be practiced in light of union with Christ.

It is one of the remarkable facts of the believer's union with Christ that it is a fixed reality. Being in Christ is not an occasional experience but "an abiding reality determinative for the whole of the Christian life," writes Ridderbos—a reality "to which appeal can be made at all times, in all sorts of connections, and with respect to the whole

church without distinction."[109] The church gathers without the pressure of earning a covenant relationship with the triune God. This relationship is already made a reality in Christ. Corporate worship is God's gift to the church, providing a tangible means for the church to be reminded of this union, to enjoy this union, and to derive benefit from this union, in order to be fortified in faith as it anticipates the full realization of salvation.

Nathan Mitchell describes the church as a "pilgrim people" who "enter the land called 'liturgy' on *somebody else's* passport."[110] The identity that the people of God assume in worship is Christ's. Mitchell writes, "We do not come to the liturgy mumbling our own name, we come uttering God's name, 'impersonating' the One who calls each of us by a new name and makes us—strangers in a strange land—friends and companions at table."[111] The most remarkable reality is that because Christians are in Christ, God does not treat his worshippers as impostors gathering under false pretenses; he treats them as children. He calls them his sons and daughters because they find their life in Christ.

The church's existence stems from union with Christ. God's plan for salvation, from its initial design to its eschatological fulfillment, centers on the reality of the Christian being united to Christ. Accordingly, God's initiative in establishing the church by incorporating people into Christ must be central in the church's understanding and practice of corporate worship. "The church has a nature and a unity that are alike the result of God's supernatural work and his grace," writes Wells. "This is where we must start when answering the question as to what worship is and how we should do it."[112] It is

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[109] Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (1975; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 59.

[110] Nathan Mitchell, "The Amen Corner: 'Being Good and Being Beautiful,'" *Worship* 74 (November 1, 2000): 557.

[111] Mitchell, "Amen Corner," 558.

[112] David F. Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-Love of God Reorients Our World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 191.

God who establishes the church in Christ by the Spirit, and it is God who continues to act within the church in Christ by the Spirit. This fundamental reality should shape how the church understands and practices its worship.

# CHAPTER 5

# THE CHURCH'S GRATEFUL WITNESS: PRACTICING CORPORATE WORSHIP IN LIGHT OF UNION WITH CHRIST

The argument of this dissertation is that corporate worship must be understood and practiced while holding the believer's union with Christ clearly in view. As presented in the previous chapter, a defining element of the church's corporate worship is that it takes place *through* Jesus Christ and *in* Jesus Christ. This proposal is by no means new or revolutionary, but it is radical. Jesus himself attests: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The church stands before God only in the name of Jesus, so it is Christ alone that makes the church's worship possible. He has opened to the church the "new and living way" to God through his flesh (Heb 10:20). It is because of him that the church can worship. Moreover, the church's worship is distinctively trinitarian; sent by the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit comes and mediates the presence of Christ to the people of God, uniting them to Christ and empowering their worship. This is where a proper understanding of corporate worship must begin: it is God's gift, enabled by the Spirit, and given in Christ to his covenant people.

While the previous chapter focused on the *who* questions of corporate worship, the current chapter seeks to present the practice of corporate worship in light of union with Christ by answering the *what, where, when, why, and how* questions of corporate worship. In other words, this chapter asks, "Given the nature of God and the relationship he establishes with his people, what does the activity of the church look like as it gathers for corporate worship?" The focus of the present chapter is on the practice of corporate worship, which pertains to the second half of my definition. Corporate worship is God's

Spirit-enabled and Word-governed gift, initiated by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, for his covenant people *to gratefully assemble in space and time to witness to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit through proclamation, prayer, singing, and the sacraments as they receive from Christ, act in him, and long for him to come again.*

## A Grateful Assembly: The *What* of Corporate Worship

If the church's worship is a good gift from a gracious God, then what must the church do in corporate worship? The previous chapter discussed that the church's worship must begin with God, since he has revealed himself through his Son, chosen a covenant people in Christ, and enabled their worship by his Spirit. While understanding corporate worship as a gift highlights the continuous activity of God by the Spirit when the church gathers to worship, it by no means precludes the church's active response. Just as an understanding of Christian sanctification in light of union with Christ does not eliminate the active offering of the believer's life, so also an understanding of corporate worship in light of union with Christ does not negate the church's active participation.[1] To the contrary, being united to Christ emboldens the involvement of humanity in these God-given activities, whether it be sanctification or worship.

The preceding action of God renders action on the part of his chosen people necessary and good as they attest to the worth and work of God. C. E. B. Cranfield writes, "The human action [of worship] is altogether secondary, being made possible by, and responding to, the action of God; but it is nonetheless—or rather for this very reason—of immense significance."[2] Such weightiness demands a clear answer to this question: what is the church's practice of corporate worship? In corporate worship the

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[1] For example, see Macaskill's argument that union with Christ is the basis for sanctification in Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

[2] C. E. B. Cranfield, "Divine and Human Action: The Biblical Concept of Worship," *Interpretation* 12, no. 4 (October 1958): 391.

church is an assembly, an εκκλεσια, that comes together in grateful witness to God and proclaims God's Word, offers prayers to God, sings God's praise, and practices the sacraments.

**An *Assembly* of God's Covenant People**

The practice of corporate worship begins with the gathering of God's people. Corporate worship cannot take place apart from an assembly. This is where the definition of a church necessarily begins: the church is a gathering of people.[3] The New Testament consistently presents the importance of this by highlighting the coming together of believers. The language of corporate worship in the New Testament is not the cultic language of the temple and its ceremonies but language of coming together, of assembly.[4] Allison writes, "By far the most common referent of the New Testament's presentation of the church is gatherings of Christians, or local churches."[5] Accordingly, corporate worship is a practice of the church gathered together. This is where the answer to the "what?" of corporate worship must begin. It begins with an assembly of God's covenant people.

Union with Christ is a vital aspect of this assembly, because by coming together believers give expression of being incorporated into Christ's body. Union with Christ has corporate dimensions. It is important to first note that Paul's use of "in Christ"

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[3] Ferguson writes, "The word 'church' means assembly. To be a church, it must meet. . . . The church must manifest that it is a body by being together." Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 235.

[4] Brunner and Hahn both highlight the New Testament's regular use of συνάγεσθαι and συνέρχεσθαι to describe the gathering of the church as evidenced in 1 Cor 11:17, 20, 33-34; 14:23, 26; Matt 18:20; Acts 4:31, 20:7-8, 14:27, and 15:6; 2 Cor 5:4. Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans. Martin H. Bertram (1968; repr., St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 11–19; Ferdinand Hahn, *The Worship of the Early Church*, ed. John Reumann, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 35–38.

[5] Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 62. Allison goes on to present examples of the local expression of the church in texts such as Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2; Acts 12:12; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1-2.

applies more often to believers as a group, and not as frequently to individuals (see Rom 12:5; Gal 3:26, 28; Eph 1:3-14, 2:10, 3:6; Col 1:2, 2:10-11).[6] Accordingly, William Barcley states, "This would suggest that 'in Christ' should not be understood primarily as an expression of the individual believer's relationship with Christ, but rather as related to Paul's conception of the corporate nature of the life of faith."[7] Thus, the church's gatherings consist of the people who are "in Christ." By implication, "Belonging to Christ means that we belong to one another."[8] The church consists of those who have been brought together as a community that is incorporated to Christ at every point.[9] While this is not all it means to be in Christ, it is certainly an important aspect of this spiritual union.[10] The assembly of God's people is a tangible expression of what it means to be united to Christ as his body, temple, and building. For corporate worship to be biblical, the people of God must assemble together.

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[6] William B. Barcley, *"Christ In You": A Study in Paul's Theology and Ethics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 112.

[7] Barcley, *Christ in You*, 112–13.

[8] Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 409.

[9] Ian A. McFarland, "The Body of Christ: Rethinking a Classic Ecclesiological Model," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 3 (July 2005): 239–45.

[10] Contrary to Schweitzer, who argues that incorporation into Christ's body is all it means to be "in Christ." He writes, "The expression 'being-in-Christ' is merely a shorthand reference for being partakers in the Mystical Body of Christ." Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of the Apostle Paul*, trans. William Montgomery (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 122. Other scholars, like Bultmann and Bornkamm, exhibit a bit more nuance by arguing that being joined to the church is the primary emphasis of being "in Christ." For example, Bultmann writes,"'In Christ,' far from being a formula for mystic union, is primarily an *ecclesiological* formula." Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner's, 1951), 311. Arguing against a mystical understanding of being "in Christ," Bornkamm observes, "Quite often it only expresses membership in the church. Obviously, no profound theological, let alone 'mystical' meaning should be wrested from such turns of phrase." Günther Bornkamm, *Paul*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 154–55.

## A *Grateful* Assembly of God's Covenant People

Corporate worship begins with an assembly of God's people, but these people are called by God to have a particular attitude in this gathering. As recipients of God's grace, gratitude should be the ongoing disposition for those who find their life in Christ (see Col 3:15, 17; 1 Thess 5:18; Heb 12:28, 13:15).[11] The thankfulness of God's people "presupposes that what they have has not come about through their own efforts but is completely given by God's grace," according to G. K. Beale.[12] It is all a gift from a generous Father (Jas 1:17-18). Therefore, Paul writes to the Colossian church, "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" (Col 3:17). Importantly, this highlights that the church's thanksgiving takes place through Christ.[13] As those united to Christ, gratitude is a distinguishing mark of the church's corporate worship.

Implied in the church's grateful assembly is an attitude of joy and celebration.[14] Joy is the disposition of the redeemed (Ps 71:23; Phil 4:4). Ceslas Spicq remarks, "The distinguishing characteristic of the Judeo-Christian religion is joy."[15] Allen

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[11] David W. Pao, *Thanksgiving: An Investigation of a Pauline Theme*, ed. D. A. Carson, New Studies in Biblical Theology 13 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 86–118.

[12] G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 309.

[13] Campbell shows from Rom 5:11, 8:1, 7:25, 15:30, 16:27, and 2 Cor 10:1 that Paul both "indicates the mediatorial instrumentality of Christ" in thanksgiving, and also that Christ's character informs and shapes his action. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 250–52. Of these six passages "four adhere to the expected type of instrumentality, while two express the instrumentality of manner" (252).

[14] The grateful, joyful, and celebratory disposition of Christian worship does not preclude the place of lament within the gathered church. However, for the church lament takes place within the context of gratefulness to God for who he is and what he has done and is doing, as well as joy for what he has promised to do. Christians are those who grieve with hope and suffer with joy (1 Thess 4:13-18; Rom 5:3-5; 1 Pet 4:12-13). What the church laments—every wrong that marks life in this world—will be made right with Christ's return (Rev 22:4). Thus, the place of lament is situated in the church's longing for Christ to come again.

[15] Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:498.

Ross selects the word "celebration" as key in describing Christian worship as "a celebration of the great works of our glorious Lord, especially his saving deeds, with a view to their fulfillment in glory."[16] The joy expressed by the church in corporate worship is not based on a subjective perspective of circumstances, but is rooted in the objective and unchanging nature and unceasing love of God (see Lam 3:22-24).[17] Thus, the church's joy does not ebb and flow but should typify every gathering for worship. Herman Bavinck writes, "God is never indebted to us, but we are always indebted to him for the good works we do. On his part there is always the gift; on our part there is always and alone the gratitude."[18] The corporate worship of the church is a grateful assembly of God's covenant people.

## In Space and Time: The *Where* and *When* of Corporate Worship

The grateful assembly of God's covenant people takes place in physical space and at a particular time.[19] Allison describes the nature of the church as being "spatio-temporal/eschatological, or assembled as a historical reality (located in space and time) and possessing a certain hope and clear destiny while it lives the strangeness of ecclesial existence in the here and now."[20] While this characteristic of the church could be easily assumed, in the virtual age of the twenty-first century where conceptions of space and time are stretched, it must be stated that the church is visible and expressed as an embodied and local reality in the here and now.[21] While the biblical parameters for

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[16] Allen Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 71.

[17] Pao, *Thanksgiving*, 27.

[18] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 571.

[19] Due to the overlap of support for the two categories of space and time, I address these two aspects of corporate worship together under one main heading.

[20] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 103.

[21] For a novel example of this stretching of space, I can be virtually present and have a "face-

worship stretch across the entirety of human life, this does not negate the physical and temporal particularity of the church's corporate worship. The universal church is manifested in local contexts and the church's worship takes place in specific places and at specific times.[22] Corporate worship, as discussed in this dissertation, can only be practiced when a people assemble together in a physical space at a specified time.[23]

### A *Physical* Assembly

Corporate worship is an assembly of God's people; therefore, it must take place somewhere. This place of gathering can be anywhere, as seen in Acts and throughout church history, but it still must take place at a material location.[24] By occupying physical space, the gathering of the church reflects the reality that it is a community united in Christ.[25] Jonathan Leeman writes that though "it's the people who

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to-face" conversation while being thousands of miles away. I can also almost instantaneously turn on the light in my bedroom or open my garage door by speaking into my phone, even if I am in a different part of the world. Regarding corporate worship, conception of space and time is "stretched" through video and audio recording in that one can listen to nearly any preacher's sermon at any time. Many churches even offer a stream of their worship service that allows one to join in and "participate" at any time and from anywhere that is convenient. To a certain extent, space and time are seemingly becoming increasingly irrelevant when it comes to the corporate worship of the church.

[22] Allison writes, "By far the most common referent of the New Testament's presentation of the church is a spatio-temporal gathering of Christ-followers—a local church." Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 149.

[23] While it is beyond the scope of the present study, for discussion of whether a church can gather across multiple locations, see Brad House and Gregg R. Allison, *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017); and Jonathan Leeman, *One Assembly: Rethinking the Multisite and Multiservice Church Models* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). Nevertheless, Scripture attests to the establishment of churches in specific places that also met together at specific times. For example, when Paul addresses his letter to the Corinthian church, he writes specifically "to the church of God that is in Corinth" (1 Cor 1:2). This was a church who gathered together "on the first day of the week" (1 Cor 16:2). The same pattern can be seen in many of the Pauline epistles. See Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 149.

[24] The book of Acts shows that the early church met in the temple (3:11), homes (2:46), a hall (19:9), and a room (20:8).

[25] Leeman writes, "Gathering as a local assembly is the very first imperative to the indicative of the unity we possess as members of the universal church. It literally makes that unity visible and active. The body of Christ is not just an idea. Nor is the family of God. Nor is the temple of the Spirit. You can actually *see* and *hear* and *reach out and touch* the body, family, and temple in the gathering." Leeman, *One*

*are* a church . . . those people *become* a church in part by gathering in a place. That place, that gathering, is the geography of Christ's kingdom."[26] While in a spiritual sense, the place of worship is where Jesus Christ is (Matt 18:20; John 4:23), this place physically manifests itself when the church assembles. J. J. von Allmen writes, "Now Christ is found where two or three are gathered in His name. Hence the place of Christian worship is the assembled church."[27] Thus, the *where* of corporate worship begins with the people of God occupying physical space as they assemble together.

**A *Weekly* Assembly**

The church's corporate worship, just as it must be embodied, must also take place in real time. An assembly comprised of asynchronous participation by individual people at a predetermined location is no assembly at all. This assembly—the *when* of corporate worship—should occur weekly on the Lord's Day. For the early church formed in a Jewish context, the concept of meeting together at a weekly interval was "entirely natural."[28] The earliest days of the church seem to establish this weekly rhythm of gathering together, particularly on the first day of the week, the day that Revelation 1:10 refers to as the Lord's Day (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:1-2).[29] As a weekly gathering, this

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*Assembly*, 23.

[26] Leeman, *One Assembly*, 18–19.

[27] Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 241.

[28] Bauckham notes, "The choice of a day *of the week* is entirely natural in a Jewish context and anything less frequent would surely not have met the need. Thus it is beside the point to ask why early Christians should have chosen to commemorate the Resurrection weekly rather than monthly or annually. It was the need for a regular and frequent time of Christian worship that led to the choice of a day *of the week*." Richard J. Bauckham, "The Lord's Day," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (1982; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 238.

[29] Lincoln writes, "The New Testament evidence for the prominence of the first day in connection with Christian worship is scanty but, when taken together with that of the postapostolic period, it points us clearly in one direction." A. T. Lincoln, "From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," in Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, 383. The clear direction it all points to is a Sunday assembly.

assembly functions as a regular encouragement to Christians to persevere in the faith (see Heb 3:12-13; 10:25).[30] It quickly became associated with the Lord's resurrection on the first day of the week, and while this may or may not be the origin of Sunday worship, Bauckham argues that "we are unlikely to have any record of a stage in the Christian observance of Sunday before that at which it was understood to be the weekly worship of the risen Lord on the weekly recurrence of the day of His resurrection."[31] Whether one believes that Scripture does or does not prescribe that the church gather for corporate worship each week on the Lord's Day, the Bible is quite clear and the history of the church confirms that the church must meet together regularly, and ordinarily, this assembly occurs on the first day of the week.[32]

In summary, while Christian worship is a decidedly spiritual activity, corporate worship is a visible and embodied activity occurring in space and time. Up until recent history, the idea of corporate worship occurring apart from God's people synchronously gathering together in a shared physical space was unthinkable, but this understanding of

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[30] Commenting on Heb 10:25, Schreiner explains that some had "made it a habit of not attending. For the author of Hebrews this isn't a light matter. Forsaking such meetings signaled great danger, for if they did not return to the assembly of fellow believers, they would face final judgment and destruction." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2015), 296.

[31] Bauckham, "The Lord's Day," 236. Bauckham goes on to demonstrate that Sunday worship likely originated from Palestinian Jewish-Christian churches. He makes this argument by deduction, writing that by the second century, "Sunday worship appears . . . as the universal Christian practice outside Palestine. There is no trace whatever of any controversy as to whether Christians should worship on Sunday, and no record of any Christian group that did not worship on Sunday. This universality is most easily explained if Sunday worship was already the Christian custom before the Gentile mission, and spread throughout the expanding Gentile church with the Gentile mission. It is very difficult otherwise to see how such a practice could have been imposed universally and leave no hint of dissent and disagreement" (236).

[32] Bauckham, "The Lord's Day"; Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church," in Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, 251–98; Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Medieval Church in the West," in Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, 299–309; Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Protestant Tradition," in Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, 311–41. For a broader historical overview of the process by which various Christian communities came to practice gathering for corporate worship on the Lord's Day, see Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 3–28.

corporate worship has slowly eroded over the last several decades, accelerated by the advent of television and the proliferation of digital communication tools in the hands of church leaders.[33] This has resulted for the need to clearly articulate and defend the space and time nature of corporate worship.[34] As Bonhoeffer succinctly states, "The Body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth."[35] The *where* and *when* of corporate worship are a tangible expression of union with Christ. Being united to Christ, while a spiritual reality, evidences itself in a grateful assembly of real people in a physical space at a particular time.

### To Witness: The *Why* of Corporate Worship

The previous chapter discussed the often-cited rhythm of revelation and response for corporate worship. When God speaks through his Word, the church responds in worship. However, while the church's active response is necessary it should not be

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[33] In the late twentieth century, Neil Postman argued that adopting a different medium for communication will fundamentally alter the message. Speaking of the use of television for religious ends, Postman writes, "Not everything is *televisible*. Or to put it more precisely, what is televised is transformed from what it was to something else, which may or may not preserve its former essence. . . . [Television preachers] have assumed that what had formerly been done in a church or a tent, and face-to-face, can be done on television without loss of meaning, without changing the quality of the religious experience." Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 118. Postman goes on to write that "Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether" (121). Amidst the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, it has been remarkable to witness the wide use of streaming and recording technologies to distribute the church's "corporate worship" over the internet. In a recent survey, the Pew Research Center found that "the vast majority of religious attenders (79%) say their house of worship is streaming or recording its religious services so people can watch online or on TV." Pew Research Center, "Americans Oppose Religious Exemptions from Coronavirus-Related Restrictions," Washington, DC, August 7, 2020, 7, https://www.pewforum.org/2020/08/07/americans-oppose-religious-exemptions-from-coronavirus-related-restrictions/. The report states that "in the previous month 80% of evangelicals said they are watching services virtually" (10–11). More specifically, "about half of U.S. adults who typically attended religious services at least once a month in 2019 (49%) appear to have substituted virtual participation for in-person attendance" (22). Interestingly, rather than this medium fostering dissatisfaction with being unable to gather in space and time, the report notes that 91% of respondents indicated that they are either "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with the services they are watching (14).

[34] As occurring in space and time, corporate worship cannot truly be practiced virtually, with the church assembly divided in space and time, any more than a meal can be eaten virtually.

[35] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 225.

understood as symmetrical to, on par with, or independent from God's active involvement in the life and activity of the church, which the idea of revelation and response can seem to imply. The church's response to revelation does not add to the worthiness of God to be worshiped, nor does it render God's self-communication any more real or complete than it already is in itself. Rather, as John Webster writes, there is a "permanently derivative character" in the response of the church to the revelation of God, and this action of the church "consists in attestations of the word and work of the God who is its creator, reconciler and consummator."[36] The church's action in corporate worship is expressed in its witness to the worth and work of God. Thus, the rhythm of corporate worship is *Word and witness*. God's revelation is better understood as *Word* in order to highlight the priority of Scripture in the church's worship and the centrality of Christ, the Word made flesh. The church's response is better understood as *witness*, which, as a type of response, is a more defined act that attests to God, to the church, and to the world, what God has already spoken.

In his work *The Lord's Service* Jeffrey Meyers states, "Not knowing why one is in a specific place or doing a certain activity is not only embarrassing, but it's also abnormal."[37] He goes on to assert that this is the experience of many Christians as they step into the weekly gathering of the church. To address this problem, the church must have clarity on "the purpose of a Sunday church service."[38] The purpose behind the church's corporate worship determines the direction its actions take.[39] If the church

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[36] John Webster, "On Evangelical Ecclesiology," in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2005), 183.

[37] Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 17.

[38] Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, 18.

[39] Witvliet states, "The rationale for a given liturgical action makes a big difference in how we practice it." John D. Witvliet, "The Trinitarian DNA of Christian Worship: Perennial Themes in Recent Theological Literature," *Colloquium Journal* (Autumn 2005): 15.

gathers in order to evangelize the lost, then the actions of corporate worship will likely take on an invitational orientation. If the purpose of the church's worship is educational, then the actions of corporate worship will emphasize intellectual stimulation and doctrinal instruction. If the church assembles for the sake of experience, then the church will prioritize emotional impact and empathetic participation in the actions of corporate worship. If the church gathers for the purpose of exaltation, then the actions of corporate worship will likely be conceived of only in relation to God.[40] While each of these purposes for corporate worship are valuable, not one of them is sufficient on its own.

So, why does the church practice corporate worship? More specifically, how should the church understand the purpose of its actions as it assembles together in worship? The answer to these questions begins with the ontological reality of the triune God who chooses a people for his glory. However, more can be said about how being chosen by Christ and in Christ—being a chosen race—shapes the church's action (John 15:16; Eph 1:4; 1 Pet 2:9). Webster describes God's election of a people in Christ by the Spirit as "the dynamic [that] determines the modes of common life and activity in which the church is visible" and that "its forms of life, its principal activities—all the ways in which it disposes itself in time and space—have to be such that they make reference to the election of God."[41] The church does this by understanding the purpose of its actions as a *witness* or an attestation to the worth and work of God.

While an emphasis on corporate worship as God's gift to his chosen people may seem to lead to the relegation of the church's role to one of passive reception, the

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[40] Meyers offers his insightful analysis of these four common approaches to worship in Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, 19–30. He concludes that, while these four dimensions of worship are essential (evangelism, education, experience, and exaltation), reducing the purpose of gathered worship to one or another of these purposes will result in seeing the church's worship as "primarily a technique for producing a particular effect on the members of the congregation, either on their will, mind, or emotions" (30–31).

[41] Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 184.

concept of *witness* argues to the contrary. This understanding of corporate worship encourages and emboldens the church's active engagement. Witness implies action. Webster writes that "the church is appointed to visible activity which is in accordance with the given fact that the world is the sphere in which the triune God's antecedent grace is wholly and victoriously resplendent."[42]

In its worship, the church exhibits the grace of God by actively bearing witness to his worth and work. Attesting to the worth of God speaks to a recognition of the greatness of God. Testifying to the work of God highlights the goodness of God. The psalmist writes, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. . . . All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your saints shall bless you!" (Ps 145:3, 10).[43] The purpose of corporate worship is to witness to God's greatness and goodness, might and mercy, worth and work.

God's worth and work come together in the person of Jesus Christ. Bavinck argues, "If Christ is the incarnate Word, then the incarnation is the central fact of the entire history of the world; then, too, it must have been prepared from before the ages and have its effects throughout eternity."[44] Thus, Jesus Christ should be the center of the church's worship.[45] Furthermore, Christ-centered worship manifests itself in a vital

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[42] Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 186.

[43] Goldingay remarks that the entirety of Ps 145 presents God's greatness and goodness as the reason for worship, and these in turn have a vital relationship. He writes, "The movement between these parts of the psalm is seamless, which encourages the making of a link between greatness and goodness and the inference that Yhwh's greatness expresses itself in goodness." John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3, *Psalms 90-150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 696.

[44] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 274.

[45] Block argues that while necessarily trinitarian, "True Christian worship focuses particularly on Christ, through whose sacrificial death and justifying work sinners are qualified for worship, and through whose resurrection they hope in eternal life and worship in the presence of God." Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 53. For an excellent treatment on the importance and implications of being Christ-centered in corporate worship, see Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand

eschatological component of the church's worship. Christians look not only back at what Christ has done, but they look ahead to what he will do. Ross describes this as the "heart of Christian worship," namely, "to recall and celebrate the hope of glory."[46]

As witness, the church recognizes that its worship is not confined to the idea of offering or response in the here and now; it is not limited to the purpose of evangelism, education, experience, or exaltation. Rather, the worship of the church is an attestation of the worth and work of God that stretches from now into eternity. Webster describes that this witness is "astonished indication. Arrested by the wholly disorienting grace of God in Christ and the Spirit, the church simply *points*."[47] This is why the church gathers to worship God: to testify to the "glad news of deliverance" and the "faithfulness of [God's] salvation" (Ps 40:9-10). Worship as *witness* is God-glorifying, church-edifying, and world-evangelizing.[48]

**Worship as Witness to Glorify God**

The glory of God is rightly the first priority of human existence (see 1 Cor 10:31).[49] His glory is the purpose of creation. This is no less true for the church's

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Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

[46] Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 503. Ross articulates the eschatological nature of the church's witness, writing that the church must maintain "the vision of the hope of glory, the anticipation of the fulfillment of the covenant, both its promises and our perfection. As we worship we celebrate our salvation through Christ who will bring us to glory, we pray for that kingdom to come, we quicken our hope by praises and anthems that direct our thoughts to the next life, and through the ministry of the Word we build our faith in this eternal hope" (70).

[47] Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 183.

[48] Ferguson similarly writes, "The remembrance and declaration of God's saving activity in Christ glorifies God, shows what the church is all about, edifies believers, unites Christians in the faith, and calls unbelievers to faith." Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 246.

[49] The Westminster Shorter Catechism summarizes this as the chief end of man: "to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Westminster Divines, *The Westminster Confession: The Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the Sum of Saving Knowledge, the Directory for Public Worship, with Associated Historical Documents* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2018), 421.

corporate worship.[50] The psalmist declares, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!" (Ps 150:6); accordingly, God's people are commanded throughout the Bible to respond to God by giving him the glory of which he alone is worthy (1 Chron 16:29; Ps 95:6-7, Ps 100:2; Matt 4:10). Commenting on 1 Chronicles 16:29, Carson writes, "We are to worship the Lord in the splendor of all that makes God *God* [emphasis added]."[51] Only the Triune, Creator-God is worthy to be praised. The church glorifies God in corporate worship by attesting to his worth and work.

**Worship as Witness to Edify the Church**

Worship as witness to the worth and work of God not only glorifies God, it also edifies the church. In other words, the church's witness in corporate worship is not only vertical and God-oriented, but horizontal as well—oriented toward building the church up into Christ (Eph 4:15). The language of building is regularly brought to bear on the purpose for the gathering of the New Testament church (e.g., 1 Cor 14:3-5, 12, 17, 26; 1 Thess 5:11; Eph 4:11-16).[52] Christians gather for the "building up of the community as the *Body of Christ*, the spiritual body of the risen Lord."[53] The goal of this edification is

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[50] Wainwright argues that "Christian worship, doctrine and life [are] conjoined in a common 'upwards' and 'forwards' direction towards God and the achievement of his purpose, which includes human salvation. They intend God's praise." Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life: A Systematic Theology* (1980; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 10; similarly, Block writes, "True worship is essentially a vertical exercise, the human response to the divine Creator and Redeemer. For this reason the goal of authentic worship is the glory of God rather than the pleasure of human beings." Block, *For the Glory of God*, 6.

[51] D. A. Carson, "Worship under the Word," in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 28.

[52] Citing these texts Peterson writes, "Paul regularly uses the terminology of up-building or *edification*, rather than the language of worship, to indicate the purpose and function of Christian gatherings." David G. Peterson, "Worship," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 861.

[53] Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Worship* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 33; see also David G. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 206; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 400.

the full and complete realization of union with Christ. John Calvin describes this as the blessing and impetus behind the church's worship: that "[the church] may be united to God."[54] By attesting to the worth and work of God in corporate worship, edification occurs as Christians are conformed to and enact their identity in Christ by the Spirit.[55] Peterson writes, "When Christians gather together to minister the truth of God to one another in love, the church is manifested, maintained and advanced in God's way."[56] Worship as witness puts an accent on the grace of God that transforms a people for his own glory.[57]

### Worship as Witness to Evangelize the World

In addition to glorifying God and edifying the church, the witness the church bears of the worth and work of God in corporate worship also evangelizes the world. There is an outward direction to the horizontal reality of Christian worship. The psalmist

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[54] Commentary on Ps 24:8 in John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, ed. David C. Searle (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 131.

[55] Macaskill articulates the acts of corporate worship as "practices that will help to nurture the identity of those who are united to Christ and to abrade the surrogate identities that we often inhabit." Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 134. The Holy Spirit is the one who empowers these acts. Rayburn explains, "The ministry of the Holy Spirit is inseparably related to Jesus Christ; it is His ministry to take the things of Christ and show them to the believers. This means that He will be teaching all the thrilling doctrines which have to do with the person of Christ." Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (1980; repr., Wipf & Stock, 2010), 35–36.

[56] Peterson, "Worship," 861.

[57] Smith describes the failure to recognize the purpose of being conformed to Christ as a "bottom-up framework" in which worship becomes "a way for us to express our praise and show our devotion—as if worship gathers us to perform for God as our proverbial 'audience of One.'" James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 74–75. Smith juxtaposes this framework with a "top-down encounter" with God, where God is the primary actor and the church receives this action in order to be transformed into the image of Christ (80). "Worship is the arena in which God recalibrates our hearts, reforms our desires, and rehabituates our loves. Worship isn't just something we do; it is where God does something to us" (77). Cf. Wainwright, who writes, "Into the liturgy [meaning, public worship of the church] the people bring their entire existence so that it may be gathered up in praise. From the liturgy the people depart with a renewed vision of the value-patterns of God's kingdom, by the more effective practice of which they intend to glorify God in their whole life." Wainwright, *Doxology*, 8.

implores the people of God to "declare his glory among the nations" (Ps 96:3), and in turn God's people ask for his blessing and grace so that all people might praise him (Ps 67:1-3).[58] The centrifugal movement of the church's witness is clearly seen in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25. While the church does not assemble for the sole purpose of evangelism, Paul assumes that unbelievers will be present and will hear what the church attests and by this testimony the Spirit might bring them to repentance and worship.[59] When the church gathers in corporate worship to witness to the worth and work of God, it declares the good news of salvation to the world.

In summary, the church assembles for corporate worship in order to witness to the worth and work of God. The purpose of *witness* maintains an appropriate distinction between the preceding and predominant action of God over the church's worship, while at the same time emphasizing the church's responsibility to take action in Christ by the Spirit. The corporate actions of the church in worship consist of attestations of the greatness and goodness of God—particularly seen in the revelation of Christ—and it is through this testimony that the church glorifies God, edifies the church, and evangelizes the world.

### Receiving from, Acting in, and Longing for Christ: The *How* of Corporate Worship

If the *why* of corporate worship is seen in bearing witness to the worth and work of God, then *how* does this take place? The answer to this question begins with the Word of God that governs the church's worship. For corporate worship to be according to

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[58] Goldingay comments on Ps 67:2, "Here the aim of God's being gracious to 'us' and blessing 'us' (that is, the aim both of God's involvement in Israel's historical or political life and of God's involvement in nature) is that the world as a whole should come to acknowledge God." John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2, *Psalms 42-89*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 301.

[59] Carson writes, "The unbeliever comes in and *overhears* what is going on in the *assembly*, and by that means is brought to recognition of need and to repentance and worship." D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 116.

Scripture then certain elements, attested to in Scripture and witnessed throughout the history of the church, will be practiced. For example, the *Second London Baptist Confession* requires four things to take place in the church's public worship: the reading and preaching of Scriptures, prayer, singing, and the administration of the sacraments.[60] These four liturgical practices—proclamation, prayer, singing, and the sacraments—give shape to the witness of the church's worship.

While these elements describe the outward form of corporate worship, the nature of union with Christ makes further claims on how these forms should function in the church's worship. There is an earthly sense in which anyone can partake of these outward expressions of worship without being numbered among the people of God.[61] In other words, apart from Spirit-wrought faith these practices are empty religious rituals. Therefore, it is necessary that these forms should be carried out in a particularly Christ-centered and Spirit-empowered way. By the Spirit, these practices become visible attestations to invisible realities, namely, that God has reconciled to himself a people in Jesus Christ. Webster writes, "The church's visibility has its center outside itself, in the ever-fresh coming of the Spirit. . . . The church becomes what it is as the Spirit animates the forms so that they indicate the presence of God."[62] Through the Holy Spirit the

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[60] *The Baptist Confession of Faith 1689*, Pocket Puritans (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2012), 22.3–6; see also the *Westminster Confession of Faith* which provides the basis for the *Second London Baptist Confession*. *The Westminster Confession*, 21.3–6. Cf. Hahn observes of the language used of corporate worship in the early church: "Where the community comes together, God is praised, his mighty acts are proclaimed, prayers are said, and the Lord's Supper is celebrated. All other terms appear only incidentally." Hahn, *Worship of Early Church*, 36.

[61] Commenting on Jesus's words in Matt 7:21-23, France writes that "spiritual activities can apparently be carried out by those who still lack the relationship with Jesus which is the essential basis for belonging to the kingdom of heaven. There are good people who claim to follow Jesus as 'Lord' and who do good works and think they are doing them in Jesus' name who are nonetheless on the broad road. 'Doing the will of my Father in heaven' is not a merely ethical category; that will also include to know and be known by Jesus the 'Lord.'" R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 292.

[62] Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 181. Webster continues, "The church is visible through the work of the Holy Spirit. Its life and acts are the life and acts of the communion of the saints by virtue of the animating power of the invisible Spirit, and are known as such by the revealing power of the

proclamation, prayers, singing, and sacraments of the church convey that God is among his people as they act. Consequently, rather than these actions being viewed as taking place on the church's own terms, these actions should be understood as occurring on God's terms, always in Christ by the Spirit.

Each of these practices of the church's worship should function to remind believers of who God is and who they are in Christ. Corporate worship should be a reorientation to reality. Life in the church is ultimately "the process of helping people to get real."[63] When the church assembles in worship and God's Word is proclaimed, prayers are spoken, God's praise is sung, and his people celebrate the sacraments, the church is being built into the reality of who it is in Christ. By taking part in each of these practices, a deeper experience of union with Christ should occur as the church receives from Christ, acts in Christ, and longs for Christ to come again. The final section of this chapter begins by defining each practice of corporate worship (proclamation, prayer, singing, and the sacraments), followed by a discussion of how union with Christ brings itself to bear on these four forms (receiving, acting, and longing).

## The Practices of Corporate Worship

**Proclamation.** The first way the church acts as witness to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit is through proclamation. As a creature of the Word, God gives to the church the ministry of the Word.[64] Proclamation in the church takes two

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invisible Spirit. . . . The Spirit's life-giving and revelatory agency is fundamental to the church's being, including its visibility in creaturely time and space" (183).

[63] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 143–44.

[64] While the ministry of the Word is a particular ministry of pastors (i.e., Acts 6:4; 2 Tim 4:1-2), this ministry is also given to all believers. For example, commenting on Col 3:16, Beale writes, "Verse 16 places squarely on the shoulders of each Christian the responsibility to 'teach and admonish one another' through psalm-based material and to sing psalm-like hymns to God. . . . [This means] that there is a place for each believer in teaching and admonishing other believers through Christ's word." Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 307.

primary forms: reading and preaching.[65] The pattern of coming together to hear Scripture was a primary mark of Jewish worship in the temple and synagogue.[66] An example is recorded in Nehemiah 8:8, when the people of God assemble to hear Scripture read and explained. Ezra, and those helping him, read the Word and "gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." With the coming of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the practice of proclamation only grows in significance. The ministry of Christ was not only confined to actions and miracles, but it consisted of words: "Jesus came preaching."[67] Accordingly, proclamation of God's Word is God's chosen means to deliver his message. The church's proclamation should be understood as ostensive; it acts as a witness to what God has accomplished in Christ and is only effective through the work of the Spirit.[68] Christoph Schwöbel writes,

> The basic form of the ministry of the Word in the Church is witnessing the truth of the revelation of God in Christ which is authenticated by the Spirit. It is the proclamation of the grace of God as the truth about God's relationship to his creatures. This proclamation can never create faith or effectively administer the grace of God—this can only be done by God himself. The proclamation as a human act is the witness to the action of God, Father, Son and Spirit.[69]

Proclamation—the reading and preaching of Scripture—is an ostensive declaration of the

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[65] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 169–92.

[66] Michael Graves, "The Public Reading of Scripture in Early Judaism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 3 (September 2007): 467–87.

[67] Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, *The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 7. Old continues, "At the center of Jesus' ministry was this reading and interpreting of the Scriptures. . . . Jesus came preaching because he had been sent for this purpose by the Father" (7).

[68] "Paul focused on the issue of comprehension, leaving persuasion to the Spirit. . . . He trusts in God's power working through him and his message rather than trusting in his own powers of persuasion, knowing that *the message of the cross*, despite seeming foolish, has divine power that other messages lack." Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 90; see also Jonathan I. Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study*, ed. D. A. Carson, New Studies in Biblical Theology 42 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 84–86.

[69] Christoph Schwöbel, "The Creature of the Word: Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers," in *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, ed. Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 133.

worth and work of God by the Spirit.

**Prayer.** A second practice the church utilizes to attest to the greatness and goodness of God is prayer. "The Christian worships God when he adores, confesses, praises and supplicates him in prayer."[70] Public prayer principally expresses the faith-filled response of the church to God as they remember his promises and demonstrate their complete dependence on him.[71] Corporate prayer plays a prominent role in the worship of God's people. For example, in 1 Kings 8:12-61, Solomon addresses God at the dedication of the temple with his prayer occupying the central place in Israel's worship.[72] Moving ahead to worship under the new covenant, the book of Acts demonstrates the priority of prayer in the early church.[73] Grant Osborne argues that rather than viewing prayer as a private activity, "the early church reversed that and thought first of corporate prayer and then of individual prayer. . . . From the beginning, corporate prayer was the core of the early church's life."[74] Whenever the church prays it attests to the astonishing fact that the

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[70] J. G. S. S. Thomson, "Prayer," in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas et al., 2nd ed. (1982; repr., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 958; cf. Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 167.

[71] Osborne writes, "Worship is the only proper response to a sovereign God who is personally involved in our lives, and prayer is the primary means by which we respond in worship." Grant R. Osborne, "Moving Forward on Our Knees: Corporate Prayer in the New Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 2 (June 2010): 267. Block describes prayer as "the supreme expression of verbal worship. . . . Prayer is a verbal act of faith; the one praying expects God to hear and to respond favorably." Block, *For the Glory of God*, 194.

[72] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 205–7.

[73] Osborne writes, "For Luke, prayer is the distinguishing mark of true discipleship, and churches that make a difference will be churches that are oriented to prayer, including both set prayers and spontaneous prayers as in the synagogue. In Acts, the verb occurs sixteen times and the noun nine times, and it refers both to praise and intercession." Osborne, "Moving Forward," 255; see also Thomson, who says, "The church was born in the atmosphere of prayer (1:4). . . . Prayer continued to be the church's native air (2:42; 6:4, 6). . . . Throughout the Acts the church leaders emerge as men of prayer (9:40; 10:9; 16:25; 28:8) who urge the Christians to pray with them (20:28, 36; 21:5)." Thomson, "Prayer," 960.

[74] Osborne, "Moving Forward," 253; Hurtado highlights the distinct place of Jesus in the early church's practice of prayer, commenting, "To characterize the evidence of the place of Jesus in early Christian prayer practice more broadly, Jesus is posited in various early Christian texts as the unique intercessor/advocate before God on behalf of the elect, as the teacher and role model of prayers, as the recipient of prayer, and as the efficacious basis of Christian prayer. . . . Collectively, these ideas and

triune God invites the prayers of his people and, moreover, that he listens to them.[75] With the Spirit of Christ dwelling within, believers pray to their Father (see Gal 4:6) through the Son and with the Spirit (see Heb 7:25; Rom 8:26).[76] Prayer is a vital and necessary expression of the church's corporate worship.

**Singing.** A third way the church attests to the worth and work of God is through song.[77] Singing is the biblically prescribed and joy-filled response of the people of God.[78] Moreover, the church sings because God is a singing God, whose song arises

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practices are unprecedented and unparalleled, especially the evidence of direct appeals to Jesus in the corporate worship setting, and they gave early Christian prayer a distinctive character marked and shaped by the exalted Jesus." Larry W. Hurtado, *Honoring the Son: Jesus in Earliest Christian Devotional Practice* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), 55. He goes on to write that "the inclusion of Jesus as recipient of cultic devotion in early Jewish-Christian circles represents an extraordinary development." Hurtado, *Honoring the Son*, 67.

[75] Wolterstorff remarks, "It's astonishing that God would listen to what we say to God. God is the creator and sustainer of our incredibly vast and intricate universe with its astounding diversity and order; you and I are mere specks within this universe. Why would God bother to listen to what we say to God?" Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 76.

[76] Allison writes, "The biblical pattern is that prayer is addressed to God the Father, in the name (by the authority) of Jesus Christ, in step with (prompted by) the Holy Spirit." Allison, *Baker Compact Dictionary*, 167; Block comments, "Through public prayer, believers express, reinforce, and develop the theology of the church, and they express their oneness with each other and with Christ." Block, *For the Glory of God*, 218.

[77] While congregational singing shares many similarities to corporate prayer and can be considered an expression of prayer (i.e., Calvin), I choose to treat it as a separate aspect of the church's gathered worship, since, as Steven Guthrie writes, "In a liturgical universe of extraordinary diversity, music is one of the handful of practices which has been and remains an almost universal feature of Christian worship." Steven R. Guthrie, "Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46, no. 4 (December 2003): 633. Ross declares, "Singing songs of praise was, and is, the appropriate and enthusiastic way for the people to tell of the glorious and gracious works of the Lord: 'He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.'" Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 259; see also Smith, who writes, "Most frequently people in the Bible sing in response to what they perceive to be divine activity on their behalf. They sing especially in response to specific salvific acts (Pss 18; 27; Isa 35:10), but they also respond in song to God's more general care and ordering (Pss 33; 65:9-13; Joel 2:21-24). People sing because they believe that God has shown, and continues to show steadfast love (Pss 100; 116; 136). . . . It is but a short step from this view of things to the declaration that God gives song, that is, the Lord, acting in history, gives reason, occasion, for singing." William S. Smith, "Why Do People Sing?," *Worship* 86, no. 5 (September 2012): 420.

[78] Block writes, "Christians must sing, not out of a sense of duty, but as a natural and spontaneous response to the exhibitions of divine glory in creation (cf. Rom 1:19-21) and their own experience of salvation." Block, *For the Glory of God*, 237.

out of his love for his people (Zeph 3:17).[79] The Old Testament abounds with calls for God's people to sing (e.g., Exod 15:21; 1 Chron 16:9, 23; Pss 33:1, 3; 96:1-2, 98:1, 4-5; 149:1). Mentioning the many invitations in the Psalms to "sing to the Lord" (Ps 30:4), Ross concludes that "singing is not an optional embellishment of worship; it is a necessary requirement of it."[80] The theme of God's people coming together to sing is largely assumed in the New Testament; however, it still includes calls to the church to sing joyfully to God and to one another (Eph 5:18-20; Col 3:15-17).[81] Singing also plays a prominent role in the heavenly worship described in Revelation (e.g., Rev 4:8-11, 5:9-14, 14:6-7). When the grateful assembly of God's covenant people takes place they must sing, for "joy inevitably breaks into song. Speech alone cannot carry its hilarity," as Paul Westermeyer puts it.[82] Martin Luther describes how singing testifies to the reality that "God has made our hearts and spirits happy through His dear Son."[83] Furthermore, those who believe this gospel "must cheerfully sing and talk about this, that others might hear it and come to Christ."[84] Singing functions to witness to God and to others the grateful hearts of a reconciled and redeemed people.

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[79] Motyer comments that so great is God's love that it "cannot be contained but bursts into elated singing." Alec Motyer, *Zephaniah*, in vol. 3 of *The Minor Prophets: A Commentary on Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 958.

[80] Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 259.

[81] Ross argues that the New Testament did not have to go into "a detailed description of praise and music . . . because all of that was so much a part of the Israelite's worship of God. The writers simply assume that such praise should continue and will continue in glory." Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 261.

[82] Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 28.

[83] Martin Luther, "Luther on Music," trans. Walter E. Buszin, *Musical Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1946): 83.

[84] Luther, "Luther on Music," 83.

**The sacraments.** The fourth—and most visible and physical—way the church's worship bears witness to the worth and work of God is through the celebration of the two sacraments or ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper.[85] The church celebrates these sacraments because Christ has established and instituted them by commanding that his disciples baptize new believers (Matt 28:19) and by commemorating the Lord's Supper (Matt 26:26-29; 1 Cor 11:23-25).[86] These two rites are, in Calvin's words, "a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward [God]."[87] They are not effective for salvation, but stand as a testament to Spirit-worked faith. Douglas Moo writes that baptism in the New Testament "functions as shorthand for the conversion experience as a whole. As such, it is the instrument by which we are put into relationship with the death and burial of Christ."[88] According to John Colwell it is "a means of . . . grace; it does not

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[85] While either term is useful and appropriate, some Protestants—particularly Baptists—prefer the term *ordinance* to refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper, but I give preference to the term *sacrament*. The latter term carries with it a weightiness that *ordinance* seems to lack. Sacrament derives from the Latin word for mystery, *sacramentum*, and is applied to these two Christian rites to convey the mystery of God's grace through these practices. The most common definition of a sacrament comes from the language of Augustine who defined a sacrament as "a visible sign of an invisible grace." Allison, *Baker Compact Dictionary*, 186; see also R. J. Coates, "Sacraments," in Douglas et al., *New Bible Dictionary*, 1044–45. Cross warns of the evangelical tendency "to want to be able to understand fully how the spiritual and the material work," but there is the mystery of God's grace involved. Anthony R. Cross, "The Evangelical Sacrament: *Baptisma Semper Reformandum*," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (July 2008): 205. He continues, "We cannot explain and understand everything (the felt need to do so is driven by an Enlightenment impulse, I believe) and sometimes we simply need to accept in faith that God works in his ways, and that we are not always privy to his reasons (cf. Isa 55:8)." Cross, "The Evangelical Sacrament," 205.

[86] Allison lists "the meanings of baptism" as including "association with the triune God (Matt 28:19), identification with the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:3-5), cleansing from sin (Acts 22:16), escape from divine judgment (1 Pet 3:20-21), and obedience to Christ for incorporation in his church (Acts 2:38-47)." Allison, *Baker Compact Dictionary*, 30. Regarding the meaning of the Lord's Supper he writes that this meal "proclaims the gospel, fosters remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, signals the new covenant relationship, unites Christians with Christ, and portrays unity in the church" (128).

[87] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (1960; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 4.14.1. For more on Calvin's understanding and practice of the sacraments see chap. 3.

[88] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 355.

effect . . . grace; but it is the ordained means through which this grace is effected."[89] Similarly, regarding the Lord's Supper, Block writes,

> When we eat and drink with hearts that are pure and lives that are clean, we do indeed experience anew the life-giving grace of Christ, who is personally present through his Spirit. But this grace is not experienced automatically; faith and openness to the work of the Spirit are prerequisites to the spiritually energizing work of Christ.[90]

Where baptism functions as an initiation into the family of God, the Lord's Supper represents inclusion in that family.[91] These two sacraments are a testament to the goodness of God seen in Jesus Christ, and as such are God's gift to the church made possible by the Spirit and received in faith.[92]

**Receiving from Christ**

After looking at the four practices by which the church worships as witness to the worth and work of God, the remainder of this chapter gives attention to how the believers' union with Christ brings itself to bear on each of these practices, beginning with receiving from Christ. The corporate worship of the church, understood in light of the blessing of being united to Christ, is receiving from God in Christ through the Spirit. When the church gathers for corporate worship, it gathers to receive Jesus Christ and all

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[89] John Colwell, *Promise and Presence: An Exploration in Sacramental Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 113–14.

[90] Block, *For the Glory of God*, 160.

[91] Ferguson writes, "Baptism is not just an individual transaction. It is not just an act of personal salvation. It is a community or social act. One is now made a part of God's people. The Spirit places the person in the one body." Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 191–92. Of the Lord's Supper he writes, "The supper for which thanks is given establishes a communion of fellowship among believers, and it maintains and sustains unity with Christ until he comes again" (252). See also Thomas R. Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2006), 67–96; James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Lord's Supper in Paul: An Identity-Forming Proclamation of the Gospel," in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2011), 68–102.

[92] For further discussion of the two sacraments of the church see Schreiner and Wright, *Believer's Baptism*; Schreiner and Crawford, *The Lord's Supper*; Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 321–409.

the blessings that flow from him. The church is built into Christ, not by offering something new to God, but in receiving from God what already belongs to the church in Christ, receiving his goodness, grace, mercy, and sufficiency. This takes place through the work of the Holy Spirit.[93] Though Christ is seated at the right hand of God, he is still active on earth as the church assembles to worship.[94] The church's action in corporate worship begins with receiving from Christ in proclamation, prayer, singing, and the sacraments.[95]

**Receiving from Christ in proclamation.** The fundamental way the church gathers to receive from Christ is by hearing the proclamation of God's Word through preaching and the public reading of Scripture. The New Testament presents God "as speaking through preaching, standing behind the proclamation of his word as the primary actor."[96] Webster writes that in the reading of Scripture "Jesus Christ announces himself to the communion of saints. . . . In the words of the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ declares himself."[97] By receiving God's Word, the identity of the church is shaped. Philip Towner observes the importance of the reading and hearing of Scripture, stating that it

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[93] Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, ed. David S. Dockery, Nathan A. Finn, and Christopher W. Morgan, Theology for the People of God (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2020), 446–48.

[94] Orr writes, "[Jesus's] activity always remains activity *from* heaven or *through* agents (the Holy Spirit or the apostles). And so, although he *is* active, he remains absent." Peter C. Orr, *Exalted above the Heavens*, ed. D. A. Carson, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 156.

[95] Meyers highlights that an emphasis on what the people of God do when they gather "is only half of the truth, and the second half at that. . . . we are called together in order to get, to receive. This is crucial. The Lord gives; we receive." Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, 94. In a similar vein, Michael Horton highlights the reality that God both summons the church to worship and bestows his gifts on his people. He writes, "This is where the emphasis falls—or should fall. Throughout Scripture, the service is seen chiefly as God's action." Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 24.

[96] Griffiths cites Rom 10, 2 Cor 3, 1 Thess 1-2, and Heb 4 and 12, to support this assertion. Griffiths, *Preaching in New Testament*, 121.

[97] Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 189.

"influences the formation, shaping, defining, and redefining of individual and corporate identity."[98] It functions to help the church become what it is as the covenant people of God.[99] The Christian faith roots itself in the reality that God is a God who speaks through his Word. It follows then that God's people must be a listening people. Hearing is "the basic human action in worship."[100] The church assembles to bear witness to God by hearing from Christ in his Word, and thus, receiving a regular reminder of who it is situated in Christ within God's story of redemption.

**Receiving from Christ in prayer.** Through the practice of corporate prayer, the church receives from Christ—but what does the church receive? In the first place, the church receives the gift of access to God through Jesus Christ by the Spirit (Eph 2:18, 3:12). Because Christ has won redemption for the church, the church receives the Spirit of Christ and can cry out "Abba! Father!" (Gal 4:4-7). In the second place, the praying church obtains the gift of intercession before God and the perpetual reminder that Christ's work is complete. In Jesus, the church has one who "always lives to make intercession" for his people as he is seated "at the right hand of God" (Heb 7:25; Rom 8:34). Peter Orr argues that the content of Christ's intercession "is his ongoing prayer for

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[98] Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 318.

[99] Towner comments, "Regular public readings of Scripture served to locate the identity in Christ being experienced by various non-Jewish converts in the story that had been in process for centuries," with the story of Christ's death and resurrection being the center. Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 320.

[100] Cranfield explains, "The human action in worship is a hearing and a receiving. The church hears the Word of God which he is; it receives his gift of himself. . . . This hearing of the Word of God, hearing what the Lord of the church wants to say to his church in its actual situation, is the primary task of the church, the basic human action in worship." Cranfield, "Divine and Human Action," 392; Webster states, "The Word is not *in* the church but announced *to* the church through Holy Scripture. The church is therefore not first and foremost a speaking but a hearing community." Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 190.

believers to persevere."[101] With the ascended Christ as their intercessor, the church makes their prayers in Jesus's name. James Torrance states,

> We can only pray in the name of Jesus, because already Jesus has *in our name* offered up our desires to God, *in our name* lived that perfect life agreeable to the will of God, *in our name* confessed our sins by His death upon the Cross, *in our name* made the one great thank-offering as when at the Last Supper Jesus took bread and gave thanks on behalf of all men and all nations for the Father's mercies. So in prayer we come by grace alone, in the name of our great High Priest, believing that we are accepted in Him who bears our names on His heart.[102]

The church receives this comfort and assurance as they pray according to the will of God, that is, prayer according to Scripture.[103] The prayers of the church should speak the Word of Christ by the Spirit as they articulate the truth contained in Scripture.[104] By this practice, the church receives encouragement and nourishment, reminded of God's steadfast love and faithfulness, as it bears witness to God in prayer.

**Receiving from Christ in song.** The singing church also positions itself to receive from Christ. Ron Man observes that while the mission of Jesus on earth was "to deliver God's message and reveal the Father" (e.g., Matt 11:27; Luke 10:16; John 1:18), Scripture also speaks of "the continuation of Jesus' ministry of revealing the Father *after* His glorification."[105] Through the Spirit, Christ's ministry of declaring God's glory continues on earth in the congregation's song.[106] This ministry of Christ is connected

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[101] Orr, *Exalted above the Heavens*, 198.

[102] James B. Torrance, "The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship," in *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 352–53.

[103] See Donald S. Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

[104] Matthew Henry provides a clear articulation of prayer according to Scripture in Matthew Henry, *A Method for Prayer: Freedom in the Face of God* (1712; repr., Fearn, Scotland: Christian Heritage, 2015).

[105] Ron Man, *Proclamation and Praise: Hebrews 2:12 and the Christology of Worship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 19–20.

[106] Commenting on Col 3:16, Beale writes, "God's or Christ's Spirit inspires [the songs] which are now sung by the new-covenant community." Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 306.

directly to singing, as the epistle to the Hebrews notes, Jesus "is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, 'I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise'" (Heb 2:12; Ps 22:22). When the church sings, Jesus exhibits his "solidarity with believers," by calling them his brothers and declaring God's name in their midst.[107] Schreiner declares, "Jesus does not praise God alone. He does it in the assembly. . . . He praises God with his brothers and sisters whom he has ransomed from Satan's power."[108] When the word of Christ is the content of the church's song, then the voice of Jesus sounds out amidst the congregation as the church bears witness to the glory and goodness of God in Christ by the Spirit.

**Receiving from Christ in the sacraments.** The sacraments are a primary way that the church receives from Christ in corporate worship. Baptism should not be first viewed as an act performed by a Christian, but as a gift received from Christ. George Beasley-Murray notes that in the New Testament "every explicit mention of Baptism is regarded as the supreme moment of our union with Christ in His redemptive acts for us and our consequent reception of the life of the Spirit."[109] The lowering of the new convert into the water points to the death of the old self, and the lifting up of the Christian out of the water highlights the resurrection that gives new life received in Christ (Rom 6:3-4).[110] It also symbolizes the cleansing from sin received by the Christian (see Acts 2:38, 22:16), deliverance from God's judgment (see 1 Pet 3:20-21), and incorporation into Christ and

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[107] Peter T. O'Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son: A Biblical Theology of Hebrews*, ed. D. A. Carson, New Studies in Biblical Theology 39 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 30.

[108] Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 94.

[109] George R. Beasley-Murray, "The Sacraments," *Fraternal* 70 (1948): 3.

[110] Wellum highlights that in Paul's letters "baptism serves as the instrument by which we are united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. . . . Baptism is *only* introduced to demonstrate that we were united with Christ in his redemptive work, and now all the new covenant blessings that our Lord has secured for us are ours by virtue of our relationship with him." Stephen J. Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants," in Schreiner and Crawford, *The Lord's Supper*, 151.

his community.[111] Through participation in baptism, believers are given a tangible expression of the life and blessings that are received by being united to Christ.

In the Lord's Supper, believers also come to receive from Christ. Jonathan Pennington argues that one of the things "the Lord's Supper gets from the Last Supper [is] the foundational understanding that our celebration is one of receiving grace, not performing a religious rite through our partaking."[112] This meal is "God's gift to us, not our gift to God."[113] By participating in this meal Christians receive nourishment as they participate through remembrance in the sacrificial death of Jesus (1 Cor 10:16-17, 11:23-25).[114] Allison writes that "as the church celebrates the Lord's Supper, Christ and all of the salvific benefits associated with his sacrificial death are present."[115] Receiving Christ through this meal vividly portrays the union and communion believers experience with Christ and with one another.[116]

**Acting in Christ**

The church is confronted with two conflicting identities as it navigates worship in the world, one is of the flesh and the other is of the Spirit (Gal 5:16-18). Corporate

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[111] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 353–57.

[112] Jonathan T. Pennington, "The Lord's Last Supper in the Fourfold Witness of the Gospels," in Schreiner and Wright, *Believer's Baptism*, 66; see also Schlatter, who comments, "By not placing the value of the Last Supper in what they did there but in what Christ did, the disciples proved that they celebrated their Last Supper as a sacrament. The meaning of their action was that it granted them the share in what Christ's death provided for them." Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ: The Foundation of New Testament Theology*, trans. Andreas J. Kostenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 359.

[113] Terry Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin: Recovering the Historic Ministry and Worship of Reformed Protestantism* (Darlington, England: EP Books, 2014), 172.

[114] See also Matthew Westerholm, "The 'Cream of Creation' and the 'Cream of Faith': The Lord's Supper as a Means of Assurance in Puritan Thought," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3, no. 1 (2011): 205–22.

[115] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 395; cf. Ciampa and Rosner, *First Letter to Corinthians*, 471–76.

[116] J. Todd Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 137–68.

worship should function to enact the church's identity in Christ. Vanhoozer explains, "When we perform a liturgical act we are in fact rehearsing reality."[117] Thus, in corporate worship, the church assembles to act in Christ by the Spirit. The idea of acting in Christ conveys two distinct ideas. In the first place, to act in Christ communicates the idea that the church's action is a participation in the divine drama as the church lives out or "acts in" its new identity.[118] To "act in Christ" is a form of imitation. Paul calls on the Ephesian church to "be imitators of God" (Eph 5:1).[119] This daunting call seems impossible because the contemporary understanding of imitation assumes that to imitate is to be identical to the original in every way, but this is not how Paul uses the term. Fowl clarifies the Pauline notion of imitation: "When Paul calls on Christians to be imitators of himself and of Christ he wants them to incorporate certain specific aspects of his life into their own lives."[120] For Paul, imitation is "not about making exact copies," nor is it outward mimicry.[121] It is a participation in the drama of redemption as believers imitate God. Vanhoozer writes,

> The Christian vocation is that of *creative imitation*, a nonidentical participation in the missions of the Son and the Spirit. The redemptive work of Christ is itself complete; there is nothing that the church can add to it, though it points to and participates in it through praise, proclamation, and, *performance*. The church is a mimesis [an imitation] of the gospel, the creative and celebratory imitation of a company of players, a community of joyful corporate witness.[122]

A critical expression of the church's imitation of God is expressed in its

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[117] Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 149.

[118] This is Vanhoozer's central argument in both *The Drama of Doctrine* and *Hearers and Doers*.

[119] The Pauline idea of imitation is also seen in 1 Cor 4:16, 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6, 2:14; and 2 Thess 3:7-9.

[120] S. E. Fowl, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), s.v. "Imitation of Paul/of Christ."

[121] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 401.

[122] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 401.

imitation of the way of the cross.[123] Addressing the gathered church in Corinth, Paul disparages the pursuit of self-edification in the assembly compared with the loving pursuit of edifying others (1 Cor 14:4-5).[124] Günther Bornkamm writes, "Each and every church member has the duty of edifying the rest (1 Thess 5:11; 1 Cor 8:11-12; 14; Rom 14:19; 15:2)," for this is what it looks like to live life in Christ.[125] The ultimate example of edification is the way of the cross, for here, Christ lays down his life for the church (John 15:13). Life in the church must be a cruciform life, as it imitates the sacrificial love of Jesus in its life together.[126]

In the second place, to act in Christ communicates that all that the church does as it gathers takes place in the context of the church's identity in Christ. Today's church has little trouble with viewing Christ as the object of its worship, but it is more difficult to grasp Christ's role as central in the activity of corporate worship. Agency in the church's worship is typically conceived of in anthropocentric terms: it is what human participants do. It is primarily their offering, their activity. The Holy Spirit certainly empowers their worship, but Christ is not personally involved in it other than as the object of praise. This is not so much Christ-centered worship as it is self-centered worship, since all of the action belongs to worship's earthly participants.

To be Christ-centered in the corporate worship goes beyond viewing Christ as only the object of worship—the one *to* whom Christians offer their praise—to seeing him as personally involved in corporate worship—the one *in* whom they offer their praise. The church's witness in worship must be practiced in light of who it now is. It is the temple of God indwelt by the Spirit (1 Cor 3:16), the body with Christ as its head (Eph

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[123] Fowl, "Imitation of Paul/of Christ," 430–31.

[124] Bornkamm, *Paul*, 187; Ciampa and Rosner, *First Letter to Corinthians*, 673–74.

[125] Bornkamm, *Paul*, 187.

[126] Fowl, "Imitation of Paul/of Christ," 430.

5:23; Col 1:18). It is united to him, even as it responds to God. Unless the church grasps this reality, worship will continue to be something that the church does, rather than something that is done only in the life it has in Christ.[127] What Paul writes is true of every believer at all times: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Union with Christ necessitates that every conversation about the church's worship speaks of Jesus Christ, not only as object, but also as the present subject of worship through the Spirit. Thus, the witness of the church in worship should be practiced as an acting in Christ. Through proclamation, prayers, singing, gathering around the Lord's table, and participating in and witnessing baptism, members of the church live out their new identity as they act in Christ.

**Acting in Christ in proclamation.** Acting in Christ in corporate worship begins with prioritizing the ministry of proclamation. Through the preaching and reading of Scripture God's people act in Christ as he testifies to the glory of God through the illuminating work of the Spirit.[128] To act in Christ in proclamation begins with the prior receiving from Christ through his word. Webster explains, "The church's speech is a second, not a first, move, a responsive act whose aim is achieved when it draws attention, not to what it says itself, but to what it has heard."[129] God speaks his Word to his ambassadors that through the ministry of proclamation he might make his appeal through them (2 Cor 5:20). Understanding proclamation as an action in Christ is both humbling

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[127] Macaskill presents this argument in terms of Christian growth and moral activity. I am arguing that the same should be applied to corporate worship. Macaskill, preface to *Living in Union with Christ*, viii.

[128] Commenting on Rom 10:14, Moo highlights Paul's use of the genitive of the relative pronoun "to suggest that Christ is the one who is heard in the message of the gospel." Moo, *Epistle to Romans*, 663; see Griffiths, *Preaching in New Testament*, 71–72.

[129] Webster, "Evangelical Ecclesiology," 190; Moo writes, "A preacher is nothing more than a herald, a person entrusted by another with a message." Moo, *Epistle to Romans*, 663.

and freeing.[130] Because God is the one who works in his people for his good pleasure, von Allmen declares that "God Himself chooses to speak through our words, comforting because we do not have to invent what we are to say, we have only to listen and pass it on. God is thus at work in our preaching (Phil 2:13, 1 Thess 2:13), so that to reject preaching is to reject God Himself (1 Thess 4:8)."[131] The task of the church in proclaiming God's Word in the assembly is simply to deliver what God has already said. This is how the church acts in Christ in the proclamation of Scripture: listen and pass it on.

**Acting in Christ in prayer.** In its public prayers the church acts in Christ by emulating his example as it expresses constant dependence on God.[132] Calvin embraced the use of the *epiklēsis* in his liturgy to cultivate a disposition of constant dependence as the church looked to God for divine help.[133] Old observes of Calvin's practice:

> The service as a whole begins with an *epiklēsis*, the preaching begins with an *epiklēsis*, and the prayers begin with an *epiklēsis*. The point of an *epiklēsis*is that we realize that our liturgical doing must be Spirit-filled. It must be inspired and empowered by a divine doing within us. Worship is not magic! It is 'valid' not because of what we have done, but because of what God's Spirit does with it and

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[130] Calvin writes that "among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.5.

[131] Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Preaching and Congregation*, trans. B. L. Nicholas, Ecumenical Studies in Worship (1955; repr., Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1962), 7.

[132] Block highlights the frequency with which Jesus is recorded praying throughout the gospels (e.g., Matt 6:9, 11:25; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 3:21, 22:42, 23:34; John 12:27-28; 17), and then asks, "If he needed this form of communion with the Father, how much more do we?" Block, *For the Glory of God*, 211–13.

[133] *Epiklēsis* means to call upon in time of need. Old writes, "It is essential to the human nature that we are constantly in need. Again and again we must call upon God for help. . . . We glorify God when we call upon him in time of need." Hughes Oliphant Old, "Calvin's Theology of Worship," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship; Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 421. For the prayers that give structure to Calvin's liturgy, see John Calvin, "The Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers and Songs (1545, 1542, 1566)," in *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present*, ed. Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey, trans. Bernard Aubert (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 307–36.

through it.[134]

Acting in Christ is to exhibit constant dependence on God by the Spirit. It is to imitate Christ whose ministry was marked by this dependence on God through prayer. The church also acts in Christ by praying through Scripture together. This was the model of Jesus on the cross, and as Donald Whitney notes, it was the "final act of his earthly life" to pray a psalm.[135] Additionally, when the church engages in corporate public prayer each Christian is reminded of who they truly are in Christ. Macaskill writes, "In prayer I know that I am not of myself; I relate to God, in God, by God. My particularities remain—whether gender, hair color, or lineage—and they are different from yours, but we are united to the same person by the same person. In prayer we live this union."[136] The praying church acknowledges that it does not come to God on its own but acts in Christ by the Spirit to call on God as Father (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).

**Acting in Christ in singing.** The church also acts in Christ by joining in with his song as God's people assemble for corporate worship. To live as children of the light, the church must sing.[137] Beale summarizes Paul's argument in Colossians 3:1-17: "Because Christians must seek heavenly things as a result of having died to the old world and having been raised with Christ into a new world, they must clothe themselves with the traits of that new world. Thus, if they are a 'new man,' they must act like a 'new man.'"[138] One aspect of acting in Christ that Paul presents is singing that teaches and

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[134] Old, "Calvin's Theology of Worship," 421.

[135] Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 88.

[136] Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 131.

[137] Highlighting the connection between being filled with the Spirit and singing, Steven Guthrie writes, "Most of Ephesians 4 and all of Ephesians 5 address what it means to live as children of light, or more conventionally, what it means to live holy lives. Paul gives many commands and instructions, but ultimately men and women are made holy by the Spirit who is called Holy. Therefore Paul's command in Eph 5:18—'Be filled with the Holy Spirit'—is the culmination of these chapters, both rhetorically and theologically. . . . The children of light are singing people, not *despite*, but *because* music engages body and sense." Guthrie, "Singing, in Body and Spirit," 639.

[138] Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 293; Bruce describes the section from 3:12-17: "As those

admonishes, enabling the word to dwell richly within God's people (v. 16).[139] To put on the mind of Christ and enact who it is in Christ, God has given the church the gift of song.[140] Word-saturated, Christ-centered singing functions as a witness to the worth and work of God and reminds believers of who they now are in Christ. It orients believers in the church away from a self-centered perspective of the world they inhabit and gives them an audible manifestation of the union they share with Christ and one another. This can be seen in Ephesians, where Guthrie argues "Paul's exhortation to sing is bound up with his emphasis throughout the Epistle on the unity of the body of Christ. Music voices the shared life of the church."[141] One freeing implication of singing as acting in Christ is the reality that what makes the singing of the church excellent is not the skill of the singers, but the presence of the Savior and their acceptance in Christ. To join Christ and sing "according to his excellent greatness" is one of the great privileges of the church assembled in grateful witness to God (Ps 150:2).

**Acting in Christ in the sacraments.** The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper present a primary way that the church acts in Christ in corporate worship. Participation in baptism and the Lord's Supper is an enactment of Christian identity in and with Christ.[142] Macaskill explains that this is because of the "covenantal character" of

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who have put on the 'new man' . . . Christians should cultivate and manifest the qualities which are characteristic of him." F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 152.

[139] Moo writes, "This verse, with its focus on the worship of the collective body, suggests that Paul is urging the community as a whole to put the message about Christ at the center of its corporate experience." Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 286.

[140] Luther writes, "Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in this world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits." Luther, "Luther on Music," 83.

[141] Guthrie, "Singing, in Body and Spirit," 642.

[142] Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 59–96; Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*.

the sacraments, which "allows participants to identify themselves with one another and with a representative, whose story becomes theirs."[143] In baptism, believers act in Christ by actively putting him on (Gal 3:27), as they publicly testify to their new identity by identifying with Christ and his death and resurrection (Rom 6:3-4). Patrick Schreiner writes, "We go underwater that we might be raised up. . . . Christ is our brother, and we follow him into fullness of life."[144] When Christians are baptized they are "redefined as those who have clothed themselves in Christ," according to Macaskill.[145] Vanhoozer describes it as "a public performance of our union with Christ."[146]

In the Lord's Supper, the assembled church acts in Christ, first, by performing the sacrament he gave to the church. As the ordinance is explained, the bread is broken, the cup is raised, prayer is uttered, and believers are invited to participate, the church acts in Christ as he commanded (1 Cor 11:23-25). Second, the church acts in Christ in the Lord's Supper by participating in his blood and body (1 Cor 10:16). But what does this mean? In the context of 1 Corinthians 10, Paul exhorts the church to "flee from idolatry" (v.14), which is an inversion of true worship.[147] Next, he appeals to the significance of the Lord's Supper, telling them that this meal is a participation in Christ. He concludes in this way: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (v.17). Paul's point is that in this meal the assembled church acts as it

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[143] Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 192.

[144] Patrick Schreiner, *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 16–17.

[145] Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 59.

[146] Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 150.

[147] Idolatry is the inverse of true worship. Lints writes, "The shape of the canonical story suggests that the overriding relation of the image (humans) to the original (triune God) is that of worship, honour, completion and satisfaction, and conversely suggests the subverting of that relationship of image to original is that of perversion, corruption, consumption and possession." Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 29.

is—the covenant people of God bought by the blood of Jesus Christ. Partaking of the Lord's Supper orients the church to its true identity in Christ. Macaskill writes that in the Lord's Supper "we remember a particular moment in time, a particular point in the story of the world that is now *our* story. . . . We play it over and over again because it tells us who we are. We are covenant members, beneficiaries of an act of place-taking that does more than simply excuse us: it defines us."[148] The church assembled in worship fights the temptation to be defined by false identities and alternate realities, instead putting on the mind of Christ by remembering who it truly is in him. Moshe Halbertal succinctly states, "Idolatry is rooted in forgetfulness. . . . Fidelity is rooted in remembrance."[149] The church assembles week after week to act in Christ and to receive from Christ to be built up into him by the Spirit for the glory of God.

**Longing for Christ**

While in corporate worship the church receives from Christ by the Spirit and acts in Christ by the Spirit, "Christ cannot be collapsed into the Spirit, nor the Spirit into Christ."[150] Though Christ is present by the Spirit, right now he is absent—as the exalted One he is "seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1). The fact of his ascension and session orients the church's worship toward longing for him to come again. This future hope shapes the practice of corporate worship today. MacIntyre argues, "There is no present that is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a *telos* . . . towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present."[151] The *telos* of Christianity is seen in Christ, so

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[148] Macaskill, *Union with Christ*, 94–95.

[149] Moshe Halbertal, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 35.

[150] Schreiner, *Ascension of Christ*, 103.

[151] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (1981; repr., Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 215–16.

corporate worship is an assembly oriented toward him as it longs for his return. "We can state with great confidence something about the future," writes Billings. "It is heading toward Jesus Christ as Lord of all."[152] With eyes fixed firmly on this future hope, the church assembles to express longing for Christ's return.

Christians are shaped by this vision of the future, the reality of heaven, a place of indescribable joy. As C. S. Lewis eloquently writes, "To enter heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being on earth."[153] There the God of all good dwells with his people (Rev 21:5).[154] The beginning of the world, where God walked among the people he created (Gen 3:8), points to life in the new heavens and the new earth where God's relational presence will be completely restored and all those in Christ will see him face to face (1 Cor 13:12).[155] Allen writes, "In the end, then, heaven comes to earth. . . . In the end, as in the beginning, God will be there."[156] This future is the hope of God's people.

But the church on earth exists in a world marked by pain, evil, and sin. It exists within the overlap of two ages—this present evil age and the age to come. Christians are

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[152] J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 33.

[153] C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1944; repr., New York: HarperOne, 2001), 127–28. Billings writes that Christians are "created to be in communion with God," and when the they are led by the Spirit to the eschaton, they do not lose their identity; rather, in the new heavens and the new earth they realize their full identity in Christ. Billings, *Union with Christ*, 33.

[154] Lister writes, "God's re-creation is more than just a better heaven and earth, or a new setting for the people of God; it is the unmediated and unrestricted dwelling place of God." John Ryan Lister, *The Presence of God: Its Place in the Storyline of Scripture and the Story of Our Lives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 67.

[155] On the restoration of God's relational presence see John Ryan Lister, "'The Lord Your God Is in Your Midst': The Presence of God and the Means and End of Redemptive History" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010). On the beatific vision see Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018). See also G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, ed. D. A. Carson, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

[156] Allen, *Grounded in Heaven*, 28.

"sojourners and exiles," navigating a hostile world as they await the home they were designed for (1 Pet 2:11). This tension has been described as the already and the not yet of the Christian faith.[157] While there has been a "radical intervention" that has taken place in the person and work of Jesus Christ, it remains incomplete in this present evil age; according to Allison, "It is only a foretaste, a down payment, with the promise of more yet to come."[158] The blessings that have already been received in Christ are real and tangible by the Spirit, but they are not yet fully realized as evidenced in the wickedness and suffering present in the world.[159] Paul writes of the day the church longs for: "When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:4). So, it is with eager expectation that the people of God await Christ's return.

Because of the eschatological reality of the church, its corporate worship should be shaped by its longing for Christ. The writer of Hebrews exhorts the church to prioritize meeting together "all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb 12:25). O'Brien comments that "he regards their gathering together as anticipating the final ingathering of God's people. The assembly is the earthly counterpart to the heavenly congregation of God's people (Heb 12:23; cf. 2:12)."[160] Similarly Peterson writes, "Each of our gatherings, week by week, should be an anticipation of the ultimate assembly of God's people around his throne in the new creation."[161] Until Christ returns, the assembly

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[157] Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 68–76.

[158] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 152.

[159] O'Brien explains, "As those who are in Christ we have already participated in the world to come, the powers of the new age have broken in upon us and we already participate in the resurrection life of Christ. On the other hand, we are still in Adam. The sufferings of this present time are still very real, even if they are not worth comparing to the glory yet to be revealed." Peter T. O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, ed. D. A. Carson (1987; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 88–89.

[160] Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 371.

[161] David G. Peterson, *Encountering God Together: Leading Worship Services That Honor God, Minister to His People, and Build His Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), 20.

of the church in corporate worship presents a foretaste of the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9; cf. 1 Cor 11:26). In the corporate worship of the church, then, God's people enter "the suburbs of heaven."[162] When the church gathers in worship they witness to God by expressing longing for Christ by the Spirit in proclamation, prayer, singing, and the sacraments.

**Longing for Christ in proclamation.** First, the church evidences longing for Christ as it faithfully proclaims God's Word in corporate worship. To make Scripture central in public worship is to prioritize a message that runs counter to the false and fleeting messages of this world.[163] It is a testimony that God's people are citizens of a kingdom contrary to the kingdoms of this world (1 Pet 2:9-10). By the Spirit, the Bible—like nothing else—orients the church to true reality, helping it "to keep on looking 'up' or 'forward,' rather than merely looking inward at itself or even at the world and its needs."[164]

In proclamation of the Word, the church longs for Christ as it confronts the reality that life in this world is not what it one day will be. In hearing the Word, the church is confronted by the dissonance of living life as elect exiles. But this Word also brings comfort and assurance as the church is oriented to its true and eternal hope. In proclamation the church has "tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (Heb 6:5). Smith articulates that this taste "births in [the church] a longing for that kingdom to come," and prompts the church to "look around at [the]

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[162] George Swinnock, *The Works of George Swinnock* (1868; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 1:241.

[163] Smith describes it as a decidedly "political act" since it "is the rehearsal of a liberation narrative for a royal priesthood, the announcement of a *euangelion* that rivals Caesar's." James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 58.

[164] Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 205.

broken world and see all the ways that the kingdom of God has not yet arrived."[165] But in heaven there will be no more need for this type of human proclamation since the power of God will be fully manifest and he himself will be the Proclaimer (Rev 21-22).[166] While on this earth God's Word is "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 11:105), in that city "the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk" (Rev 21:23-24; cf. Isa 60:19).[167] Until that Day when Christ comes, the church continues to proclaim his message, even as it longs for his return (2 Tim 4:1-5).

**Longing for Christ in prayer.** Second, the church expresses longing for Christ in prayer. Prayer brings the church face-to-face with the tension of the already-not-yet of the Christian faith. The church, then, articulates longing for Christ through the eschatological hope that marks the prayer Jesus taught his disciples: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). But while "our sufferings are a participation in his past; our hope is a participation in his future."[168] In prayers of confession, intercession, petition, and lament, the church longs for the day when "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4). The church's prayer expresses a dependence and longing for Christ.

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[165] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 158.

[166] Ross writes, "This is the point that must be stressed with regard to worship. What is 'new' about all of this is the reality of the presence of God with his people. The waiting will finally be over, the alienation and separation ended. The people of God will no longer commune with God by image and symbol but in reality because his habitation will be with them." Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 497.

[167] Smalley comments, "The glorious presence of God transcends any physical or spiritual source of illumination, in either the old or new creations; for God and the Lamb are themselves not only the temple of the holy city but also its light." Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 557; see also G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1093.

[168] Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 125.

Webster writes, "We look for the action of another, we implore him to take the initiative, to act in an affair where we cannot act."[169] So until the day when Christ returns, the church prays as a people oriented to the future, saying, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).

**Longing for Christ in song.** Third, the church expresses longing for Christ in its singing. While all of what is said about prayer applies also to the church's song, melody joined to truth makes possible a unique articulation of Christian longing.[170] Calvin "strongly commends" singing as a help to "exercise the mind in thinking of God and keep[ing] it attentive—unstable and variable as it is."[171] The marriage of truth and melody is a remarkable gift to support Christians as they live as elect exiles in a fallen world.[172] Singing songs that articulate the past grace received in Christ, the present life sustained by the Spirit, and the future hope of heaven orient the church to its true home.

Matthew Westerholm has taken care to demonstrate that what the church sings shapes "the identity of evangelical believers and believing communities by espousing a narrative utopia, that is, by shaping believers' views of teleological goals."[173] Additionally, he argues that contemporary evangelicals often exhibit an over-realized eschatology by emphasizing the "already" over the "not yet" aspect of inaugurated

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[169] John Webster, "Eschatology, Anthropology, and Postmodernity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2, no. 1 (March 2000): 22.

[170] For a fascinating study on the relationship between music and the brain see Daniel J. Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Dutton, 2006).

[171] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.31.

[172] See also John Calvin, "The Form of Prayers and Songs of the Church, 1542: Letter to the Reader," trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Calvin Theological Journal* 15, no. 2 (November 1980): 164.

[173] Matthew David Westerholm, "'The Hour Is Coming and Is Now Here': The Doctrine of Inaugurated Eschatology in Contemporary Evangelical Worship Music" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 51; cf. Monique Ingalls, "Awesome in This Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

eschatology.[174] When the church neglects to acknowledge the pain of life lived as sojourners and exiles (1 Pet 2:11), it will see little need to express longing for Christ.[175] But instead of ignoring the effects of the fall, a recognition of what will one day be at the return of Christ allows the church to confidently press into confession and lament. Carl Trueman writes,

> Christian worship . . . should provide us with a language that allows us to praise the God of resurrection while lamenting the suffering and agony that is our lot in a world alienated from its creator, and it should thereby sharpen our longing for the only answer to the one great challenge we must all face sooner or later. Only those who accept that they are going to die can begin to look with any hope to the resurrection.[176]

In response to the pain, suffering, and death in this world, the church joins together in song, week after week, to be reoriented to the hope of life in Christ when he returns and the church "will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:4). Through singing songs rooted in Scripture and accurately reflective of the already-not yet tension of the Christian faith, the church exhibits longing for Christ in its corporate worship.

**Longing in the sacraments.** Finally, the sacraments give the church an opportunity to express longing for Christ by placing believers in the dramatic narrative of salvation history. Vanhoozer describes the sacraments as "ritualized Theo-dramatic performances" where a past event is reenacted and a future event is rehearsed, yet they are "reenactments and rehearsals that take place in the present."[177] Baptism expresses the believers identification both with and in Christ, as Christians are "united with him in a death like his, [they] shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:5). Participating in baptism points to a future hope when all those who are in Christ will

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[174] Westerholm, "The Hour Is Coming," 123–70.

[175] Westerholm, "The Hour Is Coming," 178–81.

[176] Carl R. Trueman, "Tragic Worship," *First Things* 234 (June 2013): 19.

[177] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 412.

be raised with him and brought into his presence (2 Cor 4:14).[178] Thus, baptism is a dramatic picture of the eschatological hope of the church.

Macaskill explains that the Lord's Supper, like baptism, reenacts a historical event of Jesus and "directs us toward his future and affirms that this future will be ours as well. The Lord's Supper reminds us, every time we participate in it, that our current moral condition is not our final state."[179] Jesus tells the church to "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24, 25), and Paul adds that through this practice the church "proclaim[s] the Lord's death until he comes" (v.26). There is a promise every time this meal is shared: Jesus will come again. Partaking of this meal "nurtures and testifies a trust-filled ache and joyful anticipation of the return of the ascended Lord who promises to come again."[180] So while Christ's body has already been broken and his blood already shed for the forgiveness of sins, "the Lord's Supper is a proleptic celebration of victory because Jesus, through his sacrificial death that has defeated sin and death, will return to establish the kingdom of God in its fullness."[181] Every week that the church celebrates this meal it recognizes that there is a future and unimaginably greater meal still to come (Rev 19:6-9).

Billings underscores that the Lord's Supper "focuses our attention, our affections, our communities, upon being nourished by God's promise in Jesus Christ. Who is in heaven? Jesus Christ and those who belong to him. What is the central reality signified and enacted through the divine instrument of the Supper? Jesus Christ and union with him by the Holy Spirit."[182] By participating in this meal together—this

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[178] Moo, *Epistle to Romans*, 371.

[179] Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 96.

[180] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 169.

[181] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 409.

[182] Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, 174.

*communion*—with Christ and with one another, the church expresses a glimmer of its true hope of life with Christ (see 1 Cor 10:16). While this meal will not satisfy human appetites, it spiritually nourishes the church as it points to (and conveys longing for) the soul-satisfying Jesus and the eschatological hope of the church where God will dwell with them and they will be his people.

## Conclusion

Building on the understanding of corporate worship in light of union with Christ that was presented in the previous chapter, this chapter articulates the implications of this understanding on the church's practice of corporate worship. By addressing the practical questions of corporate worship, it demonstrates the function and purpose of worship in the life of the church. Corporate worship is God's Spirit-enabled and Word-governed gift, initiated by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, for his covenant people to gratefully assemble in space and time to witness to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit through proclamation, prayer, singing, and the sacraments as they receive from Christ, act in him, and long for him to come again.

Because of what the church is in Christ, it is the recipient of God's generous and saving grace. It is also the recipient of all the helps it needs for life and godliness, including corporate worship. The church gathers together for the glory of God and in grateful witness to him as it expresses who it is in Christ. The church must assemble in order to live out who it truly is. Jürgen Moltmann explains that "the *ecclesia* is, by definition and nature, the community that gathers together."[183] It is this assembly—"The visible coming together of visible people in a special place to do something particular"[184]—that is the center of life in the church. Moltmann continues, "Without the

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[183] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 334.

[184] O. Weber, *Versammelte Gemeinde. Beiträge Zum Gespräch Über Kirche Und Gottesdienst*

actual, visual procedure of meeting together there is no church. That is why everything in the church is concentrated on this procedure."[185] The church assembles together to practice who it is, in time and space, as it receives from Christ, acts in him, and longs for him to come again. Through the witness of worship, the church is built into him who is its head by the Spirit and God is glorified.

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(Neukirchen, Germany: n.p., 1949), 32, quoted in Moltmann, *Church in Power of Spirit*, 334.

[185] Moltmann, *Church in Power of Spirit*, 334.

# CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION

In Christ, the triune God comes to humanity and by his Spirit unites a chosen people to himself. The church finds its life in Christ and Christ alone. John Webster writes, "His history—the fact that there and then, this one, the incarnate Son, spoke and acted and suffered thus—is the ontological condition of the church: not simply a symbol to provoke creatures to common life but a *making*, a bringing to effect or setting forth of the mystery of the Father's will that creatures should attain their end by being united in him (Eph 1:10)."[1] The fact of the coming of Jesus—his life, death, resurrection, and ascension in history—and the Spirit's uniting of the church to him is the defining reality of the church. Union with Christ is not a peripheral doctrine in the church's worship, but it brings definition and shape to the grateful assembly of God's people who gather to witness to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit. This final chapter summarizes my argument, details additional implications, and suggests areas for further research.

## Summary of Chapters

This dissertation argues that the doctrine of union with Christ should be central to the church's understanding and practice of corporate worship. The church's identity and its basis for relating to and worshiping the triune God is in Jesus Christ alone; thus, Christ must be central at every point of the church's life together, particularly its

[1] John Webster, "'In the Society of God': Some Principles of Ecclesiology," in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *God and the Works of God* (New York: T & T Clark, 2016), 185.

corporate worship.

The first chapter provided the context for the present discussion. It began with a statement of the problem, describing the liturgical piety that often characterizes today's evangelical worship. Sadly, the meaning of worship for many Christians is functionally unitarian and anthropocentric. When worship is understood as the church's enterprise, comprised of human action and response, there is little need for an active and participating mediator. This human-centered understanding of corporate worship underscores a deeper problem for Christians: identity amnesia. The failure to remember the church's identity leads to a distortion in how the church understands its worship. The chapter then turned to the contributions of J. B. Torrance, Michael Horton, Chuck Lewis, and Todd Billings, allowing their collective insights to pave the way forward, developing a more biblical understanding of corporate worship. Right understanding requires an ontological framework rooted in the revelation of the triune God, as well as liturgical practices that correspond to and fortify this framework. The doctrine of union with Christ is a critical starting point in addressing both ends of this equation.

Chapter 2 described the ontological framework necessary for a biblical understanding of the church's worship. This framework begins with the triune God as he is: independent, good, and self-communicative. Out of the perfection of fellowship within the Trinity, God expresses his goodness through his own self-revelation. Through his self-communication God chooses a people for his glory: the church. Out of this knowledge of God, it is imperative for the church to understand what it is. The context of the church's identity is in the triune God and the source of its identity is found in union with Christ. The church can only comprehend what it is by looking to Christ. By being united to him by the Spirit, the possibility for true worship is realized. Before the church does anything, Jesus Christ is the liturgy of the church, doing on its behalf what it cannot do on its own (Heb 8:1-2). This gift of God, wrought by the Spirit, enables four realities in corporate worship: God's presence and action, and the church's acceptance and

purpose. Corporate worship gives doxological expression to what the church already is as the people of God in Christ and provides a foretaste of what it one day will be—glorified in Christ. God gives his people the gift of corporate worship through uniting them to his Son by the Spirit.

The third chapter evaluated John Calvin's theological framework and how this impacted his understanding of the church's worship. After tracing Calvin's theological development over his lifetime and the place of union with Christ within his broader theological vision, an understanding of corporate worship emerged—flowing from the gift of spiritual union with Christ. Calvin consistently held that the only hope for humanity is found in Christ, and he applied this hope to the church's worship. Calvin held that the right worship of God in the church was fundamental to a strong defense of the doctrines and practices of the Reformation. All of the public practices of the worshiping church are meant to invite people into the goodness found in God through Christ by the Spirit. The central place of union with Christ in Calvin's theology led to a doctrine of corporate worship centered on experiencing God's gracious activity, expressing gratitude for his benevolence received through Christ, and encouraging believers to look to Jesus and the life found in him as their hope in every circumstance.

Chapter 4 addressed the church's concept of corporate worship and argued that it should be understood, first, as God's gracious gift to his covenant people. After evaluating the strengths and weaknesses associated with understanding worship as a dialogue between God and humanity, the chapter argued that union with Christ transforms the church's understanding of its own actions in worship. Rather than being complementary to God's revelation, the church's actions are fundamentally asymmetrical to God's action in worship. The church does not come with its own offering and response, but united to Christ by the Spirit the church approaches God both *through* Christ and *in* Christ. The worship that God requires—worship in spirit and truth—is only possible by being joined to and identified with Christ. Acknowledging the importance of

the church's identity led to presenting a definition of corporate worship with the nature of the church in view. Corporate worship is God's Spirit-enabled and Word-governed gift, initiated by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, for his covenant people to gratefully assemble in space and time to witness to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit through proclamation, prayer, singing, and the sacraments as they receive from Christ, act in him, and long for him to come again. The chapter proceeded to answer the *who* questions of corporate worship and defended the notion that in light of union with Christ, the church's worship should be understood as a gift of God, enabled by the Spirit, and given in Christ to his covenant people.

While the fourth chapter focused on corporate worship as God's gracious gift to his people, chapter 5 addressed the role of the church's activity in worship. The doctrine of union with Christ infuses the church's action with significance. The church gathers in worship as a grateful assembly in specific places and at specific times. The rhythm of corporate worship is better understood as *Word and witness*, rather than *revelation and response*. *Word* highlights the priority of Scripture and the centrality of Christ in the church's worship. *Witness* communicates that the church's action is permanently derivative of what God has already revealed; the church's worship is an attestation to the worth and work of God in Christ by the Spirit. The witness of the church glorifies God, edifies the church, and evangelizes the world. The means by which the church carries out its witness in worship are proclamation, prayer, singing, and celebrating the sacraments. But these practices are not conducted outside of being united to Christ. Instead, united to Christ by the Spirit, the orientation of the church's action in these practices is to receive from Christ, act in him, and express longing for him to come again.

## Implications

Building on the ontological foundation of the triune God and the nature of the

church, my hope with this study is to strengthen how church leaders and members understand worship in the weekly assembly. Chapters 4 and 5 are particularly directed toward how leaders in the church conceive of the church's corporate worship. While these chapters included several implications, this section briefly examines implications for two specific groups of people in the church: (1) members and (2) song leaders.

**Implications for Church Members**

First, corporate worship understood in light of union with Christ should transform how each individual Christian conceives of their participation in the church. Christians are not defined by their history, abilities, or accomplishments—instead they are defined by who they are in Christ. Each week, through proclamation, songs, prayers, and sacraments, Christians come to be built into Christ's story. On the one hand, this means that believers do not assemble with the church under the crushing weight of performance, in which all of the action in worship falls upon them. Christians should come joyfully free of this burden, knowing that God sees them and accepts them as his children through his Son. The acceptance of their worship is not in what they have done, are doing, or can do, but it is found in the Spirit-worked faith that identifies them with God's own Son.

On the other hand, this means that participation in corporate worship is not relegated to passive detachment as if God does everything and the believer has only to receive. Rather, being united to Christ by the Spirit signifies that the believer's action is infused with consequence. Through the practices embodied in corporate worship, Christians foster their identity as those united to Christ. For example, when these two ideas are applied to the Lord's Supper, participation in this meal is seen neither as the church's offering or an enactment of a sacrifice (performance), nor is it a passive rite by which God is the only actor bestowing grace on his people (passivity). Rather, as Grant Macaskill writes, in this meal "[Christians] collectively inhabit and perform a memory

that defines [their] relationships with God, with one another, and with the world, and [they] do so in a way that locates [their] experience of participation between incarnation and parousia."[2] Christians should come to corporate worship full of faith that through their participation—the working out of their identity in Christ—it is God who works in them for his good pleasure (Phil 2:12-13).

It follows that the defining reality of union with Christ should also shape how believers view their individual place in the gathering. Christians should assemble joyfully, sacrificially, and expectantly. Believers assemble in joy knowing that regardless of the circumstances of their lives, nothing can change their God-given identity or alter the fixed reality of their spiritual union with Christ. They should come sacrificially because being united to Christ means that believers are united to one another. As those united to Christ it is no longer they who live but Christ who lives in them (Gal 2:20); thus, Christians can come to serve, knowing that as they lay down their own preferences for those of others, they are acting out their true identity in Christ. Furthermore, united to Christ, Christians can also come to corporate worship expectantly. Through the work of the Spirit, God is present and continuously active in the church's worship. His presence and activity are not predicated on anything believers do but are all of grace.

**Implications for Church Song Leaders**

Second, corporate worship understood in light of union with Christ should reshape and inform how song leaders in the church think about the songs they choose and the people they include. Discussions addressing these two topics tend to take place only at a phenomenological level, neglecting the necessary ontological starting point of all conversations related to theology, the church, and its practice. Rather than proceeding from the defining reality of the church's union with Christ, songs and people tend to be

[2] Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 134–35.

conceived of in terms of preference and experience. For song leaders in the church, the implications are significant.

How do song leaders choose songs for corporate worship in the church? While the gospel and God's Word should govern these selections, the doctrine of union with Christ sheds clarifying light on how to think about this task. The songs of the gathered church should function to help the church receive from Christ as it hears the word of Christ—the good news that God has redeemed and restored a people to himself through the incarnation, perfect life, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection of his Son. These songs should also enable the church to act in Christ as believers speak the words of Christ to one another (Col 3:16). The songs of the church should also express a longing for Christ as they acknowledge that what is experienced in the here and now is meant to point the people of God forward to what one day will be. By thinking in the categories of receiving from, acting in, and longing for Christ, song leaders will also recognize that the songs on the lips of God's people shape and form them into who they already are in Christ.[3] Thus, by putting the Word of Christ on the lips of God's people, biblically-informed songs put his Word in their minds and hearts as well.

Another implication of union with Christ shapes how song leaders consider who to involve in leading the church in singing. Often these conversations are governed by categories related to experience, performance, and (hopefully) maturity. Does this person have the skill, faith, and humility necessary for this role? While these considerations are important, they should not be the starting point. Union with Christ

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[3] E.g., Smith explains, "In worship we don't just come to show God our devotion and give him our praise; we are called to worship because in this encounter God (re)makes and molds us top-down. Worship is the arena in which God recalibrates our hearts, reforms our desires, and rehabituates our loves. Worship isn't just something we do; it is where God does something *to* us. Worship is the heart of discipleship because it is the gymnasium in which God retrains our hearts." James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 77; see also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 125–63.

reminds the church that its unity in service and effectiveness in ministry are not derived from phenomenological commonality but from ontological reality. This does not mean that style and skill are of no consequence, only that they are not of primary importance. The framework for participation in leading songs in the church should center on how each individual contributes to reflecting the unity the church shares in Christ. This means that there are a broader set of questions to address when evaluating one's participation. For example, a song leader should consider how an individual's participation might serve to build up the church into Christ. This takes skill into account, but it is viewed through the lens of edification. A leader may also consider purposefully including a diverse cast of church members stretched across various age groups, ethnicities, socio-economic classes, and stylistic preferences in order to better reflect the reality that these distinctions have been brought together in Christ (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). Again, starting with union with Christ does not dismiss style or skill considerations, but instead brings them into proper perspective within the context of the church's identity in Christ.

## Suggestions for Further Research

To be "in Christ" is best understood as an all-encompassing reality for the Christian. Kevin Vanhoozer describes the church as "the theater of the gospel, a local gathering in/of Christ: the interpersonal space designed for the enactment of salvation, the lived performance of/participation in the drama of redemption."[4] As the sphere in which the church operates, the breadth of what it means to be in Christ and its application to the church's corporate worship opens various avenues of further research.

First, it would be helpful to see further study on how the ascension of Christ shapes the church's worship. While, yes, Christ is in the church spiritually, his ascension

[4] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From 'Blessed in Christ' to 'Being in Christ': The State of Union and the Place of Participation in Paul's Discourse, New Testament Exegesis, and Systematic Theology Today," in *"In Christ" in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation*, ed. Michael J. Thate, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Constantine R. Campbell (2014; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 28.

pronounces that he is physically absent. This is a largely neglected topic as it pertains to the church's worship. Peter Orr observes, "Generally speaking, Christians have tended to focus their attention on what Jesus *has* done (his life, death and resurrection) and what he *will* do (return and reign). . . . Studies that consider Jesus in his exalted state are relatively rare."[5] While Orr gives some attention to the activity of the exalted Christ on earth, his focus is less on how this affects corporate worship.[6] Extended reflection on the tension between Christ's physical absence and spiritual presence would be a valuable conversation to studies of Christian worship.

Second, and following from the physical absence and spiritual presence of Christ, it would be helpful to see further study on the role and activity of the Holy Spirit in corporate worship. The Contemporary Worship Movement has generally exhibited an ambiguous understanding of the activity of the Spirit when the church gathers, often oscillating between viewing the Spirit's role in corporate worship as either non-existent or everything. Building from the trinitarian framework for corporate worship developed in this dissertation, a biblical-theological analysis of the Spirit's role and activity in corporate worship would be a tremendous gift to the church.[7]

Third, it would be helpful to see further study on how union with Christ could reshape conversations about diversity and unity in the church, particularly in the United States as it pertains to the idea of racial reconciliation. These discussions center on noble aspirations—the healing of racially-inflicted wounds, the experience of heaven on earth,

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[5] Peter C. Orr, *Exalted above the Heavens: The Risen and Ascended Christ*, ed. D. A. Carson, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 1.

[6] Orr, *Exalted above the Heavens*, 155–78.

[7] For some helpful entry points to this discussion, see Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 152–62; Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 234–36; Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, ed. David S. Dockery, Nathan A. Finn, and Christopher W. Morgan, Theology for the People of God (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2020), 446–55.

or the expression of a diverse community united in a common mission—but often focus on the church's experience rather than on the church's reality. When experience is the primary driver of the conversation, solutions tend to be rooted in pragmatic methodologies; the answers gravitate toward whatever works. The doctrine of union with Christ could provide a fresh starting point and helpful reorientation for these important conversations. Within this discussion, the role of corporate worship in racial reconciliation could also be considered, asking the question, "What can the church do as it gathers to worship to foster unity in the church?"

Fourth, as Western culture accelerates into a world flooded with digital communication, there is a need for clear-headed and biblical thinking on the use of technology as a medium of corporate worship. A brief survey of modern church history reveals a penchant for pragmatism in how the church utilizes technology, particularly in its gathered worship. The following questions, among others, could be considered: "How does audio and video recording effect the church's understanding of preaching?" "How should the church think about the use of virtual and augmented reality technologies in its ministry?" and "Is virtual worship a suitable alternative for physically gathering?" Answering questions related to the physical particularity of corporate worship could go a long way in understanding how to consider technology in the church. Additionally, synthesizing Paul's conceptions of gospel and ministry as folly in the eyes of the world in 1 Corinthians could shed illuminating light on these conversations.

## Conclusion

The rich implications of what it means to be united to Christ should fuel and inform the church's worship. Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus opens with praising God for the blessings that flow to those who are in in Christ. He declares that every spiritual blessing comes through Christ (Eph 1:3). Election is in him (v. 4); righteous standing before God is in him (v. 4); adoption as God's children is in him (v. 5);

redemption and forgiveness are in him (v. 7); an inheritance is in him (v. 11). Paul then prays that the Ephesian church might receive "wisdom and revelation" in the knowledge of Christ that they might know their hope, the riches of all they have received, and the power of God in Christ (vv. 16-21). He concludes this introduction by pointing to the preeminence of Jesus Christ as the one who is "head over all things," the One who has been given to the church, his very body (vv. 22-23). Paul knows the propensity of God's people to forget all that they have received in Christ—to forget who they are in Christ—so he longs for his readers to know the joy of being united to Christ so that they might walk in the goodness of all that is received in him. The church's worship is a celebratory witness to the glorious reality of being in Christ, reminding believers of who they are, what they have, and what they one day will be in Christ.

The doctrine of union with Christ reminds the church that God's grace is not conditional, but freely bestowed out of the limitless perfection of the triune God. The church does not gather to prove themselves before God, nor do they gather to only be acted upon by God. The church assembles to be reoriented to the reality of who it already is in Christ as children of the living God, heirs of the covenant promise, exiles looking to their true home. Rooted in Christ, the church assembles each week in corporate worship, enabled by the Spirit and governed by God's Word, to gratefully witness to the revelation of the triune God by receiving from Christ, acting in him, and longing for him to come again.

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ABSTRACT

ALL WE HAVE IS CHRIST: THE CENTRALITY OF
UNION WITH CHRIST IN THE CHURCH'S
CORPORATE WORSHIP

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020
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This dissertation argues that union with Christ gives definition to the church, and should thus be central in the church's understanding and practice of corporate worship. Chapter 1 discusses the functional theology expressed in the corporate worship of today's evangelical church, contending that it often misunderstands the place of Christ in its worship. Chapter 2 establishes an ontological framework for corporate worship rooted in the perfection of the triune God, who chooses a people for himself in Christ by the Spirit, making possible his presence and action, and giving to the church acceptance and purpose. Chapter 3 explores the theology and practice of John Calvin, evaluating how his doctrine of union with Christ shaped his understanding and practice of corporate worship. Chapter 4 presents a working definition for corporate worship that begins with understanding it as God's Spirit-enabled and Word-governed gift to his covenant people in Christ. Chapter 5 addresses the activity of the church in relation to God's preceding and predominant activity, arguing that in Christ by the Spirit the church assembles to witness to the worth and work of God by receiving from Christ, acting in him, and longing for him to come again. Chapter 6 summarizes the arguments and identifies implications and potential areas for further research.

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