

The Kind of Worshipers the Father Seeks

My name is Mark Dalbey. I am Dean of Students here at Covenant Seminary and assistant professor of practical theology. We are in an access/residency course with four students. This course consists of twenty lectures. We will be looking at a biblical, historical overview of worship and then a lot of application: how you plan a worship service, what about music in worship, and what about various contemporary questions like whether or not Power Point should be used in a service. Let me open in prayer. Let us ask the Lord's blessing on our time.

Father, we thank You so much for this opportunity to come together as a class, studying Christian worship. We pray it would be not only that, but much more. We pray that You would be present by Your Holy Spirit, leading us and guiding us, illuminating Your Word, giving us insight as to how to apply these things You show in our lives, in present and future ministries. Thank You, Father, that You have created us as worshiping beings and that in the power and grace of the Gospel of Christ You are restoring us to that great purpose that will continue unto all eternity. And so Father, we pray now that You would help us, that You would meet us where we are and take us along toward greater Christ-likeness as we spend this week together. We look to you and thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Let me tell you a little about myself. I am in my eighth year now at Covenant Seminary. I have served two pastorates in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), one in Richmond, Indiana and one in Cincinnati, Ohio. Before that I was a chaplain at Geneva College in Pennsylvania. I have been married to my wife, Beth, for almost 31 years. We have three children: Stephen, who is married and 27 years old, Kristen, who is married and soon expecting our first grandchild; she is 25, and Eric, our youngest, is 22. We love being at Covenant Seminary, though I miss being in the pastorate. But I love the multiplication factor of the seminary. Here my impact is not on one congregation deeply, but on many congregations along with the team of faculty, helping people like you learn and grow and minister to God's people.

What is it that God wants when it comes to worship? This is a particularly relevant question for those of us in Presbyterian circles where we have the "regulative principle of worship," which we will talk about later. This basically means we want to do worship the way God has told us to do it. God is the regulator of worship in that way. As we look at this, wanting to do what God wants us to do in worship, we have to look at Scripture to try to understand that. That is what we will be doing early on in this course. We will try to create a broad and somewhat deep understanding of God's will and desire for how He wants to be worshiped. This is what Jesus talks about in John 4, which is the first place we will go, which will lead us into the whole subject. Jesus in John 4 has a conversation with a woman. There are several things that are striking and unusual about this interchange, especially for a Jewish rabbi of that day. First of all, for Jesus to talk to a woman was rather radical in His time. Second, for Him to talk to a Samaritan was also radical because the Jews generally did not like the Samaritans, who were of a mixed ethnicity and religion. Often in order to go from the north of Palestine to Jerusalem in the south and avoid Samaria, which lay in between, Jews would cross the Jordan River, travel down the Transjordan region, and then come back across the Jordan River so that they would not have to come through Samaria. But John tells us at the beginning of John 4 that Jesus has to go through Samaria.

Jesus meets up with this woman, a Samaritan woman, who is getting water from the well at high noon. We generally do not go out in the heat of the day if we can avoid it. This morning I took a walk with my wife. At high noon we probably would not be taking a walk. So why is this woman getting water at

noon? Well, the rest of the women in this little town of Sychar in Samaria had shunned her and did not want to have anything to do with her. As we find out later, this woman had been with five husbands and the man she was with now was not her husband—as Jesus said to her, much to her amazement. I suppose the women of the community would think, “This woman is a threat to my marriage.” Thus they did not want to have anything do with her. But Jesus engages her in conversation. As we begin to read in 4:19, Jesus has been talking about living water, an appropriate subject as you are standing by a well. The woman says, “I would love to have some of that water! Then I would not have to come here to get water anymore.” But Jesus is obviously trying to take her to the deeper things, a relationship with God. Right after Jesus says to her that He knows she has had five husbands and the man she is living with now is not her husband, she says this (4:19-26):

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I who speak to you am he.”

I do not know how many times I have read this passage, but every time I read verse 25, “When [the Messiah] comes, he will explain everything to us,” I cannot help but smile. That is just what happened in this conversation! Here in John 4 two incredible things happen. Jesus’ first revelation of Himself as Messiah is to this rejected Samaritan woman. Also, what I believe to be the most significant teaching of Jesus on worship is found right here in John 4. He does not give this teaching to His disciples, but to this Samaritan woman in their discussion of living water and the right place to worship. Jesus says in verse 23, “The Father is seeking worshipers.” This word, “seeking,” is only used here in reference to the Father seeking after something. He is seeking after worshipers. Calvin and others have said that our most basic and defining identity as image bearers of God is that we are worshiping beings. We were designed to worship God, to have our affections, passions, and our whole lives focused on God. Then everything else would come into its proper place because of our full attention and worship to God. What fundamentally happened in the Fall, as Paul says in Romans 1, is that people stopped worshiping the Creator and began to worship the creation, whether a sports team, a woman, fame, or whatever it may be. God made us as worshiping beings, and He is seeking after worshipers who will worship Him. Bob Dylan wrote a song years ago that says, “You gotta [have to] serve somebody.” Every creature serves (or worships—serve is a biblical word for worship as well), every person gives his or her affection and honor to something or somebody. God wants that to be Himself. That is how He made us. In one sense the Fall most significantly damaged—not beyond repair or restoration—our understanding of the right object of our affection.

The Father is seeking our exclusive worship, that we would only worship Him. We not only know that the Father is seeking worshipers, but here Jesus also tells us the kind of worshipers He is seeking. If we want to worship God the way He wants to be worshiped we should pay close attention when Jesus says, “These are the kind of worshipers God is seeking...” And what kind of worshipers is He seeking? He is seeking those who will worship in spirit and in truth. The discussion prior to that revelation is a discussion of the right place to worship—is it in Jerusalem where the Jews worship, or is it on, as the woman says, “this mountain?” Now, the Samaritans who had adopted the first five books of the Old Testament had made a worship place of Mount Gerizim. When the children of Israel entered Israel they

were to read the blessings of the law from Mount Gerizim and the curses of the law from Mount Ebal. She is asking where the right place to worship is. Jerusalem or Gerizim? Now, remember what is going on in Jerusalem at this time. There is full temple worship with sacrifices and so on. And Jesus says, "...a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth..." He also says a time is coming when they will worship neither at Jerusalem nor on this mountain. He does say, "Salvation is from the Jews." He is not discounting God's unfolding plan for the fulfillment of His redemptive purposes to come through the Jews in Himself. But He is saying that even what is happening in Jerusalem is going away because the fullness of what it represents is now present—in Himself.

When we say that God wants worshipers who will worship in spirit and in truth, what comes to mind? We might think of worshiping in our hearts, having hearts that have been changed and turned toward the Lord. In the modern, North American context we might think of spiritual things as having to do with emotion—spirit as opposed to the mind. One of the controversies about this passage is whether the term "spirit" here is referencing the Holy Spirit or human spirit. I would say it is clear biblically that we cannot worship God apart from the Holy Spirit. I do not think we have to necessarily make it into a dichotomy in this passage—"spirit" could reference both the Holy Spirit and our spirit. I think at its core it is Holy Spirit-enabled worship from the human spirit, if we can describe it that way. I think it is worship from what the Bible calls the heart. Jesus said, quoting from Isaiah, "These people worship me with their lips, but their hearts are far away." I think what Jesus is saying here is that the kind of worshipers God is seeking will give more than lip service to Him; they will actually worship Him from the core of their being, from the heart, from what Jonathan Edwards called our affections. We are to worship from that which is at the center of our being, which the Bible calls our heart in many places. We are to be devoted to God through and through, from the very core of our existence. So God is seeking those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth.

Now, notice that the first thing Jesus says about worship does not concern sermons or sacraments or prayers or songs. These are all very important things that we will look at in much detail later on. But Jesus here goes to the core of the matter. God is seeking worshipers who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. What do you think He means by "in truth"? Maybe He means that our worship should be informed by substance, which we find in Scripture. To worship the Father in truth means to worship Him according to the specifics He has revealed about how He wants to be worshiped. As we will see when we look through the Old Testament in our biblical survey, He has given very specific, detailed instruction about the sacrificial system and the Levitical priesthood. We are not lacking in the Old Testament for much detail in instruction on how God wants to be worshiped. But it is never separated from the heart. I would say that to worship in truth means to worship according to everything He has revealed in the Bible, which includes worshiping Him in spirit. Sometimes, I think, in various Christian circles we put these two against each other. We say, "You worship the Father in spirit, we will worship Him in truth." Sometimes the divide comes when we say, "The Pentecostals and charismatics worship Him in spirit, the Presbyterians and Lutherans—we worship Him in truth." The Bible does not say, "The Father is seeking worshipers who will worship Him *either* in spirit *or* in truth." It is a both and statement. The two are inseparably linked. I think this is vital for our understanding of worship. I think we may be weaker on one aspect of this than the other at different times in our lives, or in different denominations, or in different congregations within a denomination. Some corrective may be needed. Our thinking of worshiping in truth may feel heartless at times, like we are going through the motions, doing the right acts of worship but our hearts could be far away. To worship in truth does not mean rationalism, just as to worship in spirit does not mean emotionalism. It is not emotion for its own sake. We should not evaluate our worship based on whether or not we had many good feelings and expressed

them somehow. It is the truth of the Gospel striking at the core of our being that then brings about a Spirit-empowered response to God as we strive to worship Him in spirit and in truth.

The question I think that we have to ask from this text is, who worships God this way? One of the things Dr. Chapel, our president, says is that the Scripture is given to fill the holes in our lives. It is as if we have so many holes and we need the Bible and the Spirit to fix our problems because of our fallen condition. We can look at a text of Scripture and ask, what is it in this text that reveals to me what is lacking in me that only Christ can meet and fill? As we look at this text the question we should ask is, if these are the kind of worshipers God is seeking, then I fall way short. Knowing my own heart I cannot say about myself that I worship the Father with all of my affections set on Him according to every expressed detail He has given me in His word about how He wants to be worshiped. Thus the question can be, is God unsuccessful? Does He seek but not find true worshipers, if these are the kind of worshipers He is seeking? The woman at the well was not worshipping God in this way. The disciples were off getting some food—Jesus may have even sent them away because He knew they could not handle the conversation He would have with the Samaritan woman. It is possible that they would not have been able to hear what He was saying, being so struck that He was even talking to the woman. But what a wonderful blessing! This woman who had so much to be ashamed of runs back to her village and tells everyone, “Go meet this person who knows everything about me”—and I think the implication is, He knows everything about me and yet still loves me and has given me living water. Then nearly her whole town comes to Christ. What a remarkable event that happened there in Samaria! This is a foreshadowing of what will happen even to this present day as the Gospel goes to new, unreached places and cultures.

The good news of this passage is the good news of the Gospel. The Father finds one true worshiper, and His name is Jesus. The only person who is fully like us, fully human—yet without sin—while remaining fully God, who worships the Father perfectly in spirit and in truth is Christ Himself. This is why I begin here in this course. Most foundationally, worship that is pleasing to God is only done by those who are in a relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ. Worship is about union with Christ, it is about us belonging to Him, being joined to Him by grace through faith. Thus as He offers true worship to the Father, we offer true worship to the Father as we hold onto Him. He presents our worship, which is so often tainted with wrong motives, not fully holding to the truth—He presents and perfects our worship, and the Father receives our worship as if it is His Son’s worship. This is the Gospel of grace applied to this most foundational aspect of our existence as worshiping beings. So, the Father seeks true worshipers, and they are all those who throughout time and space have put their faith and trust in Christ and have come to the Father through Christ. The true worshipers are those who belong to Christ, who offer their worship through Him as the only one who can make it acceptable to the Father. This is one way worship is Christ-centered. It is all about Jesus, otherwise there would be no true worship because He is the only one who worships fully in spirit and in truth.

Sinclair Ferguson once said, “Worship is a congregational event in which Christ mediates our prayers, conducts and leads our praise, and preaches His word to us. He alone is the God-ordained worship leader, the minister in the sanctuary.” That is a rather significant statement, but I would suggest to you that it is profoundly biblical. Most of us have been taught that the way Christ helps us when we pray is that He takes our prayers, makes them His own, and presents them to the Father. We do not really have a problem with that. We should not, or else there would be no true prayer. This statement by Ferguson is basically applying a theology of prayer that many of us have been taught and apply to other aspects of worship beyond just prayer. In Hebrews 2:10-13 the writer of Hebrews says this:

In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says,

“I will declare your name to my brothers;
in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.” And again,
“I will put my trust in him.” And again he says,
“Here am I, and the children God has given me.”

Dr. Peterson, who teaches systematic theology here at the seminary, said, “There is no greater chapter that has to do with the deity of Jesus Christ than Hebrews 1. And there is no greater chapter that has to do with the humanity of Jesus Christ than Hebrews 2.” Our passage is here in the midst of Hebrews 2 where the writer is showing what kind of Savior we have, pointing out that He is made perfect in suffering as the author of our salvation. He is the one who makes us holy, and He is the one who has established us as being of the same family with Himself. Thus in verse 11 we are told that Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers—or sisters.

We could spend a long time thinking about the implications of Jesus not being ashamed to call us brothers. I have two brothers, both younger. There have been times when I have been ashamed to call them my brothers, and I am sure there have been even more times when they have been ashamed to call me their brother. But think about the one who knows everything about you—your worst stuff that even you have blocked out of your thinking about yourself. He still loves you and accepts you and forgives you and delights to call you His brother or sister. This is an amazing, amazing reality. And it is a vital reality, for Him to come into our presence when we gather in corporate, public worship with those of whom He is not ashamed. Look at verse 13. Here He is standing in the presence of the congregation before His holy Father in heaven with those who are joined to Him by grace through faith, those whom He is making holy like Himself. And He says, “Look Father, here am I, and the children You have given me.” He is not saying, “I guess I have to come to worship with these people who are gathered in my name, and we will have to go through the motions, but I am so ashamed of them, I wish I did not have to call them brothers.” No, what He is saying is the exact opposite of that—although sometimes that is our attitude toward worship. I would argue that Jesus loves where you worship more than you do. He loves to worship with people where we sometimes have to convince ourselves to get out of bed and dressed, overcome bad attitudes, hope we do not run into certain people as we gather to worship with our local church. Hopefully that is not true of us, though it may be if we are honest. But Jesus loves to worship where we worship, with all the problems and struggles that are there.

I want to focus on Hebrews 2:12. Jesus here is the subject. He is saying, “I...” We can see this from the end of verse 11 where it says that Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers. So Jesus says, “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.” He will declare the Father’s name to His brothers and sisters of whom He is not ashamed. Let us think about that. What does Jesus do when He comes to our worship services? He does two things, which in essence are everything. Worship is a dialogue between God and His people. Everything in this dialogue, which begins with God, that is a declaration of God’s name in some way, in the broadest way of looking at that, is done by Jesus. The preaching of the Word would be a declaring of the Father’s name. The calling into worship, the pronouncement of forgiveness after a prayer of confession, the reading of Scripture, the preaching of the Word, the invitation to the Lord’s Table, the pronouncing of the benediction—everything in the dialogue of worship that starts with the Father and comes to His people, centers around Jesus, who is in the middle of it, declaring it. Most of us can agree with that, though we may not think of the preacher as actually being Jesus and declaring His word. But however great or weak the preacher

may be, if he is being faithful to the Word as he stands up to preach, Jesus is joining His voice with that preacher and declaring the name of the Father to the congregation, to His brothers and sisters of whom He is not ashamed. Part of our struggle is understanding this idea—Jesus is here, and He is glad to be here, and He is delighting in us! We have to remind ourselves of the good news of the Gospel. But the startling thing is the second half of verse 12: “...in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.” It is as though Jesus comes out to be where we are, and when we sing He joins His voice with ours and leads the congregation in singing. He is the song leader; He is the respondent in worship. Thus everything that happens in the dialogue of worship that begins with the congregation and goes toward God the Father, Jesus is in the middle of that, leading it. Dr. Edmund Clowney, who was the president of Westminster Seminary for many years, describes it as, “When you are singing, you are sharing your hymnal (if you use one) with Jesus.” He is leading in the singing of praise to God.

That is an amazing concept. We think about that and we wonder how Jesus could be both the receiver of worship and the giver of worship. It is because of what we would call in theological terms the hypostatic union. The hypostatic union means simply that at the very same time God the Son is both fully God and fully human. Thus what you can say as to His being God you can say about the person of Christ, and what you can say as to Him being human you can say about the person of Christ. He both declares the name of God as God, and He sings praises to God as one who is fully human. In the mystery of the incarnation, in His continuing as the glorified God-man (which we sometimes forget about), He is still fully human and fully divine. He comes to us to be with us through, I believe, the agency of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. But it is really Christ who is present—we will talk about that more when we discuss sacraments later. And He is present with us as the God-man. Thus Christ-centered worship is not just about the content of our songs and prayers and sermons, but it is about the reality of the presence of God the Son in every aspect of every element in every worship service. This is a vision for worship the way God desires. If the worship of the Son as the only true worshiper is the only worship God accepts, then somehow His Son has to be connected to every aspect of how we worship for it to be acceptable to Him. I think Ferguson’s statement is a good and helpful indicator of how that happens.

Now, the interesting thing here is that Hebrews 2:12 is a quote from Psalm 22:22. If before reading any of this I were to ask you what you remember about Psalm 22, what would you say? What is the first thing that comes to mind? Jesus! It is a messianic psalm that talks about Jesus’ crucifixion. Psalm 22:1 says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This is what Jesus cries out from the cross. Psalm 22 is a psalm of lament in the first 21 verses, and a psalm of celebration and triumph in verses 22-31. At the beginning it says, “To the director of music. To the tune of ‘The Doe of the Morning.’” How many of you remember that tune? Nobody knows that tune? Was there such a tune? Yes, but what we have here in the Psalms, God’s inspired hymnbook, are words, not notes or melodies. God is a wise God. He knows the diversity of the people He has made and the generations who will follow. There was once a tune that Psalm 22 was put to, called “Doe of the Morning.” I was teaching last January in Bulgaria to a group of pastors and their wives from the Evangelical Congregational Church there that our PCA Mission to the World missionaries are working with. They have a conference every January and they gather at this hotel. It was a great time of teaching and interacting and speaking through a translator. Many of them understand English but some did not. At one point I asked this question, “How many people here remember the tune ‘Doe of the Morning’?” No one did. One man raised his hand and said, “We are not as old as you. We do not remember it.” I know this about “Doe of the Morning.” I can tell you something about the music. In David’s day, whatever musically expressed lament was the musical expression of the first half. Then there is a shift in the tone, the sense of the music, from lament to celebration. We have a few songs that may make that dramatic change. This psalm basically represents the lament of what Christ had to go through in the crucifixion to the triumph of the

resurrection and the Gospel going out to the nations. This is what is happening in this psalm. David, then, is essentially saying, “The risen, ascended, Holy Spirit sending Christ now stands in congregations of His people and sings praise to God.” This is just as we talked about in Hebrews 2; that is the fulfillment of this.

As you look through Psalm 22 you see the kind of songs Jesus is willing to join His voice with. I think song is at the heart of what is represented here. I think the reason song is the focus here is because it is a place where different generations and classes and nations of people show much diversity. There is vast diversity in musical expression. Jesus is willing to join His voice to that vast diversity. In Psalm 22:23 it says, “You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!” Jesus delights to sing a Jewish-sounding song in worship. Then 22:27-28 says, “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations.” Jesus delights to join His voice with the worship of all nations to which the Gospel goes. Thus Jesus is willing to join His voice with the songs of all nations. He is also willing to join with the songs of all socioeconomic classes of people. We see that He is willing to join with the rich in 22:29a, “All the rich of the earth will feast and worship.” And He is willing to join with the poor, as we see in 22:26a, “The poor will eat and be satisfied; they who seek the LORD will praise him.” Thus we see Jesus joining with Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor. He is also willing to join in the song of those who have already died and those yet to be born—generational songs. In 22:29b it says, “[A]ll who go down to the dust will kneel before him—those who cannot keep themselves alive.” I do not know about you, but I am thankful that we are able to continue to sing the songs of dead people. Most of the songs in most hymnals were written by people who are no longer alive, but their song goes on. And Jesus will join with song of the generation yet to be born as we see in verse 30, “Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn...” Scripture always seems to have about four generations in view: those who have come before us, the present generation, our children, and the generation yet to be born. For me, I have my mom, myself, my daughter, and a grandchild due to be born soon. The Bible seems to keep four generations in front of us all the time. Thus, whether it is a multitude of nations, a range of socioeconomic classes of people, or across the generations, Jesus delights to come with His brothers and sisters whom He is not ashamed to call brothers and sisters and sing the praises of the Father. Jesus delights to sing in the style and manner and musical expression of Africans, South Americans, Asians, old people, young people, rich and poor—because it is the Gospel song. That is what binds our worship together in that way.

Let us look at Hebrews 8:1-2, which says, “The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.” The word meaning “serves in the sanctuary” is the word from which we get our word “liturgy,” which at its root is service to God. Here Christ is presented as the chief liturgist, if you will, the chief worship leader in the true sanctuary, which is the heavenly sanctuary. I think this is at the core of understanding Christ-centered worship for those of us who live at this point in the history of God’s saving work between Pentecost and the second coming. If there is one phrase that captures what I learned as I did my doctoral studies on worship here, it is this: “Biblical worship draws on the richness of past expressions of biblical worship and the freshness of new expressions of biblical worship.” One thing I want us to see as we go through this course is that if you hope to solve once and for all whether or not we should do “traditional” worship or “contemporary” worship, please understand that we will not solve that question in this class. I think what we will discover is far better than resolving that question or others like it. What God calls us to transcends the solving of that problem. I want to help us expand the repertoire of musical and other resources we draw on when we put together a worship service. I would like to have hymns written in the fourth century that

serve our Gospel purposes in a service we plan today, as well as songs written this year. I want to expand our understanding of what is honoring to God and what Jesus delights to join Himself with in our corporate, public worship rather than limit it by saying I do not think that is pleasing to God. There are many cultural considerations that will limit what is appropriate to use in worship in any given situation. For instance, if a song or prayer you want to use is written in French, you will want to try to find a translation. It would not be appropriate for something to be only in French if no one in the congregation speaks French. There are contextual relevance and appropriateness issues.

Here are some examples of people who have considered cultural relevance in worship. Calvin took the Psalms to Geneva, Switzerland where there was no singing. He brought that element of song back into worship. He brought the ancient hymns of the Israelite people, the Psalter, into Geneva, Switzerland in the mid-1500s with new musical expressions. He was drawing on the richness of the past and the freshness of gifted composers of musical expression. He brought that forward into his day to bring life to the worship of the church in Geneva, Switzerland. Tim Keller in his context of Manhattan, New York, has many gifted musicians in his congregation, some of whom play in some of the best symphony orchestras in the world. He is making use of historical expression in their worship, but also incorporating into that the idea of “folk music,” which lends itself to and is aided by the musical talents of those in his congregation. In their evening service they use jazz music in worship, and again this is because of the context they are in. Keller and his church draw on contemporary elements as well as the rich history of hymnody. Scotty Smith pastors Christ Community Church in Nashville, Tennessee, where the song sounds a little different than in Manhattan. There are many gifted musicians in his congregation as well. There they have been incorporating old hymns with new musical expression, so you have the richness of history with the freshness of new musical expression. I have been in Ghana three times where I have been involved with worship, teaching pastors and worship leaders and learning much more than I taught. One time I was in a worship service in a place called Adonai Chapel. Their youth choir sang the hymn, “Count Your Many Blessings.” This is a hymn found in many North American hymnals, but the harmony and rhythm were quite different sounding. It was like if Paul Simon went to South Africa and BBC broadcast it. All of a sudden you have all these new harmonies and you are wondering where they came from. The youth choir could do more than one harmony at a time. They had about six or seven different rhythms going and harmonies I did not know the tonal scale of which could fit together. It was beautiful. It was an old hymn with an old tune, arranged in a way that fit with the context.

In a worship conference once someone said, “We will despise no voice Christ has pleased to employ, expanding our own music palette when we can and exercising heroic forbearance where we must.” This person recognized that all of us with a little musical appreciation can learn to engage in musical expressions in worship that may not be our favorite. And we may even learn to like those different musical expressions. At one time I did not like broccoli, but now I do. I had to have my taste palette expanded to actually believe broccoli tastes good. But I do not like coconut. I have tried many times to like coconut, but I just do not like it. It would make me gag when I was a kid because of the texture. I do not like high-pulp orange juice either for the same reason. But when I am at someone’s home and they serve me coconut cream pie, I have learned to exercise heroic forbearance and eat the pie, realizing that others are enjoying and delighting in it—it is their favorite. Sometimes you can learn to love what others love, and sometimes you sort of put up with what others love and go along with it.

There is another aspect that is important and that we have to recognize. There is a wide range of musical giftedness from congregation to congregation. What do you do when you are in a congregation where no one plays any instrument or sings well? Do you eliminate song in worship or do you draw in what you have and pray for God to add to your number some people with musical gifts? He does do that. Many times the musical expression of worship and the formality or informality of worship is an expression of

who the people are who make up the congregation. At the end of the day, it is Christ's voice that makes the music pleasing to God. When He joins His voice with the most musical human earthly expression of music, what God hears ultimately is the voice of Jesus. And if He joins His voice to the most out-of-tune music that causes great pain to the ears of those who appreciate good music, what God hears is the voice of Jesus. I think we need to strive for musical excellence but also recognize that ultimately what is most important is the voice of Jesus joined with us.

I once heard a story that may or may not be actually true, but it is a great story. A great concert pianist, Paderewski, was giving a concert in New York City. There was a mother who brought her young boy of seven years to the concert to try to inspire him to want to practice the piano more for his piano lessons so that he could become a great piano player. Before the concert began the mother saw someone she knew and was carrying on a conversation with them. The little boy slipped away from her and went backstage through a door that said, "Do Not Enter." In another moment he was out on the stage with the beautiful grand piano, sitting at the piano playing with one finger "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" (a very simple children's tune). The crowd hushed and then was horrified. What an awful, horrible thing that a woman let her little boy go up on the stage! This could ruin the whole evening, they were thinking. Just then, Paderewski stepped out on the stage. He motioned to the crowd to be quiet and not to worry. He came up to the little boy and put his arms around him and whispered in his ear, "Keep playing." So the little boy kept playing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" with his one-note arrangement. Paderewski played beautiful melodies and counter melodies that incorporated "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." The crowd gave them a standing ovation. And do you know what they probably went home and told everyone when asked about the best part of the evening? It was not what happened after, which I am sure was great and wonderful. It was what he did to incorporate this simple expression of a children's tune. I am sure the kid thought he was doing a great job, playing on the piano in front of all those people. But the one who made it beautiful was the concert pianist, Paderewski.

For us worship is much like that. We tend to think we have it right, we have good musicians to play as we sing, or whatever it may be in different elements of worship. We tend to think we have it together and that God is pleased because we are so great. But we are actually like the little boy playing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." That is an important thing to remember. I think we should strive to play "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" with the most musical excellence that we can. But remember that Christ is the one who makes it beautiful in the ears of God because of His redemptive grace for us.