

Relationships Among Worship Leaders: Unity & Praise

Let us open in prayer.

Father, thank You so much for the Lord Jesus Christ, that He is the One who perfects and presents our worship to you. Thank You that as we look at Your Word we have an anticipation that You will reveal more and more of Yourself to us and more of what it means to worship You in Spirit and in truth. May we be found in Christ as those worshipers whom You are seeking after. May we never veer to the right or to the left or go our own way in following after Him and being in Him as we worship You. Father, as we begin to look at what it means to worship well with those around us in community, we pray that You would open our hearts and minds to understand and apply what You desire as Your people together, who corporately come before You in public worship. We look to You now and thank You for the power and presence of Your Holy Spirit, seeking Him even now through Christ. Amen.

Before we look at Romans 15 and the topic of the second lesson, I want to quickly walk through a worship chart. In a year's time I will give several talks at different churches. Because there is so much controversy surrounding worship, people want to know where the church is going or where the church is not going. Thus many times I will meet with the pastor, the elders, or the music team and try to help them understand what I hope to accomplish as I talk with the congregation. I find this worship chart to be useful because, without going into much detail, it is enough to see that I am not completely wacky or off to the extreme or another with many of these controversies.

The basic premise of my treatment of worship is that worship is from the heart, according to the Word, in the power of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ, and unto our glorious God. We will start with the phrase, "worship is from the heart." As we saw as we studied worshiping the Lord in Spirit and truth, worship comes from a heart that is in union with Christ and filled with His Spirit as we offer up our whole being to God. Since I most often address Presbyterian audiences, I find it is helpful to add that our whole being includes our emotions. Sometimes in Presbyterian circles we think something like, "the less emotion is displayed in our worship the more reverent it is." We put things at odds with each other that the Bible does not. If I were teaching a Pentecostal or charismatic group it might be helpful to add that our whole being includes our minds. It is good to remember what our whole being incorporates. Worship is from the heart, according to the Word. We worship God according to His Word. His Word says we are to worship Him from the heart, and in unity of one heart and mouth—we will look at that in this lesson, from Romans 15. As a part of worshiping God according to His Word we should make use of the biblical elements, which include the preaching of the Word, songs, sacraments, offerings, professions of faith, vows, and testimonies. We will talk about all those things as we go through this course.

When we think about what sort of songs to use in worship, I think our repertoire of songs should include great old songs, including the Psalter, sung to both old and new tunes. I think it should also include simple songs. The church has always sung simple songs. Many people may say, "We should not be singing these simple praise choruses." Well, what are the doxology, the Gloria Patri, and the "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy" songs? These are simple, repetitive songs that have been used to bridge between other elements or as simple responses of God's people. A simple song like "He is Exalted" could be used as a response or tied together with another hymn. So our repertoire should include simple songs, old and new. It should also include great new songs, like "In Christ Alone." This is a modern-day hymn in both words and music with great four-stanza structure that has drawn many people across a range of styles into singing and enjoying it. We should also include songs of the nations. I think we need

to worship in a local place with contextual relevance, but also with reminders that we are part of a church that is all around the world. The church goes back into history and into every corner of the earth. Many times when people come back from a mission trip in another part of the world and are sharing with their home church a report of their trip, they often want to sing a song in another language that they sang with the church they were visiting, a song that was a part of a wonderful cross-cultural worship experience they had. When you are connected with a particular group of people in another part of the world in an ongoing relationship, occasionally singing a song in their language reminds people of that connection. Even if no one in your congregation speaks the language of the people group you are connected with, singing one of their songs from time to time, I think, can enrich us and remind us that we are a part of the communion of saints that not only goes backward in time but also today goes around the globe.

In worship we want to use biblical elements that represent the Gospel. We will talk more about this later, that there should be a Gospel movement in a worship service. Also, its design and intention is to be transformative. A worship service is not simply for gaining information. It is being in God's presence in a way that we are being changed to be more like Christ. That is very important. Also, we should worship in the power of the Holy Spirit. Apart from the Holy Spirit there is no effectiveness or fruitfulness in worship. He is the person of the Trinity through whom God is present, through whom Christ is present. We should worship through Jesus Christ. He is the glorified God-man. He prays for us, He declares God's Word to us, He sings with us. He is the fulfillment of Old Testament worship as the perfect sacrifice, the Passover Lamb, the new tabernacle and temple, the way to the new Jerusalem, our great High Priest. He brings the worship of heaven to earth now in a first-fruit fashion. We worship in the power of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ, and unto our glorious God. Do you see the Trinitarian nature of worship? He is worthy of our praise, He receives our worship, He delights in us, and He sings over us. We will look at the Zephaniah 3 passages in our survey of worship in the Scripture. It is almost as though when we sing, Christ's voice is singing, and the Father responds by singing over us songs of delight. He is not ashamed of us as His children.

It is very important to discuss corporate, public worship and all of life as worship. Frame uses the phrase "narrow worship" to describe our Sabbath worship and "broad worship" to describe the rest of our lives. Sometimes we think that one is more important than the other. When we do this I think we are separating things God intends to be together. We come together on the Lord's Day in the presence of God with His people, where by the means of grace we are strengthened in our faith and equipped and sent by the benediction to the other six days of the week. In those six days we live to His glory in living all of life as worship. The pattern is not that these two are against each other and we have to pick one. The pattern is the ebb and flow of life in this one-in-seven pattern God established in the beginning. Out of corporate, public worship we go into a life of worship in our families, workplaces, communities, and all of creation. As we are told in Romans 12, we are to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. Burnt offering language is behind that Romans 12 passage. Or as in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." That is a passage that describes all of life as worship. Even the mundane things we enjoy so much like eating and drinking are to be done to the glory of God. And then we are to go back into the corporate, public worship of God. This is a continual movement of life. When we come back together we confess where we fall short in those six days, where we failed to love our wives as Christ loved the church, or where we failed to be a light to people around us at our workplace, or whatever it may have been. We also celebrate the victories He has given us by His grace in those other six days. We are growing; we are making an impact and advancing the kingdom in the power of the Spirit. We come together to be further equipped to do more.

Corporate, public worship is to be under the oversight of elders and at the same time it must utilize the gifts of the congregation. Those things should not be at odds with one another, and we will talk more about that. It should be edifying to the congregation. Some people may think if anything in worship is directed toward the people then it is man-centered worship. That is not true. Man-centered worship is worship that keeps God out. God-centered worship includes the fellowship of believers. It is corporate public worship. Dr. Rayburn, who was president and professor of homiletics and worship here at Covenant Seminary, wrote a book called *O Come Let Us Worship*. In that book he lists fellowship as one of the biblically mandated elements of worship. I think that is a valid point that we sometimes neglect. For worship to be edifying to the congregation it should be understandable to the people who gather. There were many books written in the 1980s and 1990s here in the United States concerning “seeker-sensitive” or “seeker-driven” worship. Is worship for unbelievers or is worship for believers? I do not want to discredit the whole discussion and the many, many conferences that were held about this, and this may be an oversimplification. But it seems to me that if in our planning, leading, and carrying out of worship we have in view that our corporate, public worship services will include covenant children and new believers—it seems that the things we would do to make worship understandable for children and new believers would be nearly sufficient to make it understandable for unbelievers who may be present as well.

The first time you do the Apostles’ Creed as a church, and if you know there are some people present who have recently come to Christ and do not know what the Apostles’ Creed is, you might say, “As Christians we profess Jesus as Lord, as the early church did. This is a statement, a summary of what we believe are biblical truths that we want to declare before God and before the watching world, and by doing so we remind ourselves of things we hold dear.” Having given this introduction, you would then proceed to recite the Apostles’ Creed. What have you done here? You have made something that could be confusing more understandable to the children and new believers present. If there are also unbelievers visiting your church, they may say, “Well, I do not agree with this creed, but at least they explained why they do it.”

Finally, I think worship should be contextually relevant. Especially since Vatican II in the Catholic Church, there is no one who would argue against worship being in the language of people who are present. But is contextual relevance only about the language of the people? I would say that is vital, and perhaps most important. But there are other aspects of a culture and context. What is the education level? What if no one has more than a sixth grade education in a congregation you are called to serve? Will that affect your preaching, the words you use or do not use, the way you try to explain things? Obviously it will. This does not mean you do not teach them about the Trinity, justification, sanctification, glorification, and so on. But it means that you will need to do so in a way that takes into account the educational level of your congregation, using language they can understand. I also think songs in worship are a place where cultural dimensions are expressed. In different places around the world different instruments are used and different tonal scales are used. That is part of what shapes a context. When missionaries first went to Ghana, Africa, they made converts dress like Europeans. They brought organs with them because they thought you could not worship the Lord without them. They outlawed the use of percussion instruments in worship because that had to do with what they saw as the dark, evil ways of Africa. Thankfully we have come beyond that now. To say that you do not have to use an organ in worship is not to say that the organ is bad. I think organs are wonderful. It is an instrument that was actually meant to replicate many different kinds of instruments—it has similarities to trumpet stops and so on. But I think song is another place where a contextual, cultural dynamic gets expressed in the local church. Aesthetics is another such area, expressed by the style of building, if you have one.

When I first went to Cincinnati to kind of re-plant a church that had recently been planted but had gone through a major split, they were worshipping in an elementary school. My children still call this the “hotdog church” because we would worship on Sunday mornings in an elementary school that had a personified hotdog on the wall—it was a big hotdog with a head and ears, made to look like a human. We did not preach from under the hotdog, we set up our chairs so that the congregation’s backs were to the hotdog, but there is only so much you can do to make a place like that feel aesthetically like a worship place. We put up a few banners—you do what you can where you are. But if you are ever designing a church you realize that there are many personal tastes and theological statements that get intermixed. “Oh, we have a chance to build a building! Here is what I want.” We built a building with that same church that used to meet in the hotdog school. There were only 11 families in the congregation, but all the adults in those families had different thoughts and desires in regard to the building. We had some interesting discussions about whether or not we should have a large pulpit in front, and we discussed various other things in that process. Aesthetics will differ from place to place, or between different subcultures in a place.

“Biblical, reformed, and Gospel-driven worship glorifies God, transcends style, edifies the church, and evangelizes the unbeliever.” That is a statement from a group called “Worship Reformation” that I was part of the leadership for. Many pastors and music directors from within the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in particular are joining with this group. This is a rather unifying statement. There is much that could be expanded from this statement. There is much room for differences, especially in style. But if you embrace this statement, you could be a part of the Worship Reformation network and strive toward this being more generally accepted than it may be now in the church.

Let us look at Romans 15. When I was in pastoral ministry for 15 years, I think the most tense, stressful, and challenging 30 minutes of most weeks were the 30 minutes before the call to worship in the Sunday morning worship service. When my children were younger, that was because we were trying to get everyone ready and to church on time and trying to stay focused on my sermon and not get upset by having to change a diaper at the last minute. It was challenging; it was family dynamics that made it tense. When my children were younger I pastored a church one mile from where we lived. So on Sunday mornings I would go over to the church and do last minute things, like finish going over my sermon. Then I would go home for the stated purpose of helping my wife, Beth, get the children ready, thinking this was a good thing. Loving my wife as Christ loved the church meant going home and attending to helping her, even though I was pastor. I think this is a true and valid principle. The problem was, I would be so preoccupied with what was about to happen that I would be no help to her. I was like a fourth kid at those times. Finally one time she said, “Mark, if you really want to love me well get up, take your shower, put on your suit, go to the church, and do not come back before service. I appreciate your attempt to help with the kids, but right now you are not sanctified enough for that.” That was helpful for both of us to realize that my trying to help with the kids on Sunday mornings did not make things easier for her, and it made things worse for me.

In that same church we had families take turns on a monthly basis cleaning the church building. In this congregation there were varying levels of what it meant for the church to be clean. For some people it meant the church being spotless and immaculate, while for others it meant, well, there were no clumps of mud in the sink and therefore it was clean—though that is an exaggeration. There was one family in particular who when it was their month to clean the church would come and put in their time, but the church did not look like it had been cleaned. The carpets still needed sweeping, the toilets still needed cleaning, the windows still needed to be scrubbed. Because I thought the state of the church would be upsetting to the families with very high standards of cleanliness, I would go over on Sunday morning and take an hour or an hour-and-a-half to get the church up to the cleanliness standard of those with the

highest standards in the church. Now, that was not exactly the best preparation for me. Hopefully it was a reflection of a servant's heart, though it was probably more a reflection of not wanting controversy in the church or not wanting the family who had "cleaned" to be hurt by comments others might make. But it was not good preparation for worship.

Often times in places I have served or visited for the weekend, and even overseas in places where I have done conferences and workshops, it often seems there is tension on Sunday morning right before the worship service between the pastor and the musicians. The choir may want to run through their piece one more time, the person running the sound board may want to do another sound check, the people doing special music may need to practice something—everyone seems to want to come as late as possible and yet still get as much preparation in as possible, going over something for the last time before the service starts. Sometimes the musicians are even upset with one another. And almost always in worship you have this backdrop of the pastor saying, "Will I have enough time to preach my full sermon?" and the musicians saying, "Will we have enough time to do all the songs we want to do?" Or people may just be struggling. I have had the wife of a couple I was doing marriage counseling with come up to me 10 minutes before the service was supposed to start and say, "Pastor, do you know what he did this week?" And then she would proceed to talk to me as if we were in a counseling session. I am thinking, "I kind of need to go pray with the elders right now..." But what does it mean to shepherd the flock in that situation? I think many times it means asking, "Can we talk about this later?" But how can you do that? This is her pain, it is her struggle, and I am her shepherd. And so sometimes I would have much angst because of trying to figure out situations like that. And sometimes you as the pastor just may not be as prepared as you should be to lead the other parts of the service beside the sermon—maybe you just did not put any time into that.

All these things can make for the time leading up to the worship service to be tense. If it is true that God wants us to come together in unity, then that is a good time for the enemy to try to bring in disunity and disharmony. With that in mind, let me read Romans 15:1-13. Here I think God is making it very clear through the Apostle Paul that what He desires when His people come together to worship Him is that they come together in unity.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written:

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;

I will sing hymns to your name." Again, it says,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,

and sing praises to him, all you peoples." And again, Isaiah says,

"The Root of Jesse will spring up,

one who will arise to rule over the nations;

the Gentiles will hope in him."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, as you look at that passage you realize that Romans 15 is actually a continuation of Romans 14. In Romans 14 Paul has been addressing issues of the strong and weak—issues like meat offered to idols. Is it all right for Christians to enjoy such meat? In this passage, in 15:2, Paul says, “Each of us...” Who are the “each of us”? The “each of us” is the strong and the weak. Everyone should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. Thus whether you are strong or weak, the ultimate goal is to please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. I think that the relationship between the strong and the weak here and in 1 Corinthians where this issue is dealt with again is sort of a mutually reciprocal, interdependent relationship—somewhat analogous to husband and wife.

Paul says, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church” and “Wives, submit to your husbands as the church submits to Christ.” But if I get up in the morning and ask my wife, “Beth, are you going to submit to me today as the church submits to Christ?” Or if my wife gets up in the morning and asks me, “Mark, are you going to love me today as Christ loved the church?” where will that day go? But if I get up in the morning and pray silently to myself, “Lord, help me to love my wife as Christ loved the church,” and if my wife gets up and prays, “Lord, give me the grace I need to submit to Mark as the church submits to Christ,” that day will probably go better. Why? Because we are paying attention to what God is saying specifically to us. Both these commands are under the overarching command to submit to one another out of reverence to Christ. Husbands submit to Christ by loving their wives as Christ loved the church, and wives submit to Christ by submitting to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. But together this marriage will have unity to be able to accomplish the kingdom purposes for which every marriage under God is designed.

Every church will have issues that could be put under the category of weaker brother and stronger brother. For example, a church might ask, “Should we have a drum set?” Some people would say that would be absolutely wrong. Drums are of the devil. That is where the evil spirits get into worship, especially if you use the second and fourth beats rather than the first and third. Some people actually argue that. Are they the stronger brother or the weaker brother? I think they would be the weaker brother. The stronger brother, I think, would be someone who understands that (as I will try to show as we go through this course) wind instruments, stringed instruments, and percussion instruments are all used in the Old Testament to accompany songs in worship. An appropriate and effective use of instruments that serves the congregational voice and the content of the song can be done with a variety of instruments. But if some think that it would be against what God wants to use drums, then what do you do in that situation? The ironic thing is that usually the people who are against drums in my experience (I am just focusing on drums; it could be something else), often are very theologically and biblically knowledgeable and see themselves as strong. And in some areas they are strong. But having knowledge and being the stronger or weaker brother do not necessarily coincide. You may know much but still be weak on a certain issue. I think all of us are strong brothers in some things and weaker brothers in other things. It is not as if any were the strong brother on everything, not even pastors. Even pastors are the weak brother in some things.

Look at Romans 14:19: “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” That is the goal. Part of the way that goal is accomplished is when weak brothers become stronger. Basically Paul says to weaker brothers, “Do not judge, and grow up.” He says to stronger brothers, “Do not offend, and be patient.” If stronger brothers are seeking not to offend and to be patient, and if weaker brothers are seeking not to judge and to grow up, that will help us toward the overarching goal of peace and mutual edification. Then a congregation can continue to grow and develop and

worship God well, even while there are inevitable issues of controversy around these weaker/stronger brother issues. It is very important to God, in my opinion, not necessarily to eliminate all those problems. That will not happen until the return of Christ. We still have a congregation made up of sinful people who have strong personal preferences and desires, who are easily offended, who judge, who are impatient, and all those things. But God wants us to find that place where we are unified, coming together and allowing for differences. We are not called to be uniform; we are called to be one in Christ—with diversity even in our views on some of these secondary issues.

As you look at Romans 15, Paul is saying that Christ is our model. He was willing to receive insults all the way to the cross. He was willing to be weak in order that we might be redeemed and ultimately be made strong in Him. His goal in life was not to please Himself. If that were true He would never have gone to the cross. But He saw the need of the people of God, namely us as sinners, and for the joy set before him of seeing our redemption He endured the cross, despising its shame. He now sits at the right hand of the Father and calls us to run with perseverance the race set before us (Hebrews 12). Romans 15:5-6 has a very liturgical, almost poetic feel. I have used these verses as a benediction. “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This sounds like a benediction. Paul is saying that the source of the unity he is calling us to is God. God has to give it to us. It is a God-given thing that we must call out to God for. Calvin said about this passage, “God is not truly glorified by us unless the hearts of all agree in giving him praise, and their tongues also are joined in harmony. For the unity of His servants is so much esteemed by God that He will not have His glory sounded forth amidst discords and contentions.” God wants His people to worship Him with one heart and mouth. Somehow we have to find ways to get beyond the things that divide us and focus on the things that unite us when we gather for worship. I have come to accept that this is part of the regulative principle of worship. God wants to regulate worship. He wants it to be from the heart—He wants to regulate your heart as the starting place. And He also wants us to come together in unity when we come before Him. Now, we have not talked about sermons, sacraments, prayers, or songs—we have talked about a heart being in unity with other hearts who are gathered. This is part of the framework into which, then, the elements of worship begin to be shaped and come together.

Part of this unity happens in worship itself. We sing together, we pray together, we respond together, we are one together, we come to the Lord’s Table together, we hear a sermon together—being together is a natural part of worship. So part of what God does in a worship service is knit our hearts together through this shared experience of being in His presence. At the time of the Reformation, Zwingli’s view of worship was largely informational. Calvin’s view was that worship was not less than informational, but more. It is to be transformational. I think one of the ways worship is transformational is by growing us in unity, seeking reconciliation with others and then coming to the Lord’s Table together—the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is a means of grace that seals a deeper unity in worship itself. I think that is something to keep in mind as we plan and lead worship. One of God’s desires is that we come before Him in unity, and He uses worship itself to unify His people with each other. Colossians 3:16 is an amazing passage, especially when you look at it in terms of the relationship between unity and worship. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” There is something we are doing together. We are singing together. The word of God dwells in us and songs come out. But look at the lead-in to verse 16. Let us start at verse 12: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in

perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”

Here is repetition of the importance of unity and peace among the brothers and sisters. This relationship between unity and praise is all throughout Scripture. Jesus talked about this in Matthew 5:23-24 where he says, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” Leaving a gift at the altar was an act of worship at that time. How can we break bread from one loaf and drink from one cup as one people if we have bitterness, anger, and slander toward one another? Normally we would say, “Before you come together next week to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, if there are people you need to be reconciled with, reconcile yourselves.” There are times when I have been to services or have led services where 10 minutes or so are provided for people to search their hearts to realize who they need to be reconciled with and go be reconciled with them. I might say, “As we are meditating in our hearts, if you realize you need to be reconciled to Paul, please go sit by Paul and say, ‘Paul I think I have really sinned against you. Can we talk about it after the service? Will you please forgive me?’” Sometimes it is appropriate to offer a time to be reconciled right there before coming to the Lord’s Table. Then when you come together it is amazing.

It is like in my marriage. When Beth and I got married we agreed that every night before we went to sleep we would pray together. That went along great for the first few months of marriage, until we had our first big fight that did not get reconciled before we went to bed. I, of course, thought I was right and she was wrong, and she thought she was right and I was wrong, and we were at an impasse. I do not remember who said this first, but let us imagine it was me: “Beth, do you want to pray?” She said, “Yes. But you go first.” I said, “No, you go first.” Why were we talking like that? Because neither of us felt like praying. We cannot with integrity and intimacy come before God as a couple when we are angry at each other. Our prayers are hindered until we are reconciled. So when this happens we work it through, talk it through, sometimes until one o’clock in the morning, and then we agree to finish in the morning because it begins to get worse often as we get more tired. But after we are reconciled, then we come together to pray with God. The depth of closeness to God and each other is enhanced. The praise to God is in relationship to our unity with each other. That is a biblical principle of worship. This is true for couples, for friends in small groups, and for a local church.

We cry out to God to give us this kind of unity so that we may glorify Him. Look at Romans 15:7, which says, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” This is another example of how Scripture does not see a problem with identifying something as being something we must cry out to God for because He alone can give it, and that same thing being something that we must be exhorted to action for. He exhorts us to accept one another, to be actively engaged in accepting one another. What is the standard? We are to accept one another as Christ accepted me. That takes acceptance to a whole new level, when I think of how Christ accepted me. He is not ashamed to call me a brother, as we saw in Hebrews 2, even though He has every reason to be ashamed of me. Turning to my wife, son, dad, an elder in the church, or an older or younger person in the church and accepting him or her is nothing compared to what Christ did. We must do this even though there are some brothers and sisters who are very hard for us to accept as brothers and sisters. There was a person in one church I served who was so mad at me over certain issues that this person took his chair and turned it toward the wall so that during my sermon he was staring at the wall. That was not good. That made it tough for me to preach. It only happened over a few weeks, but those were a few weeks too many. How do I accept that person as God in Christ has accepted me? As that person was working through what he needed to work through, I sought to find out how I had offended him. But he was silent and unwilling to talk. That was tough. There were people who had done this to me in their hearts before,

but I had never been treated like this so visibly. And as he sat in the third row with his chair to the wall, the rest of the congregation saw what was going on as well. It was a hindrance to us worshipping God and praising Him together—and it was certainly a hindrance to my ability to preach without being distracted!

So we are to “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” There is a connection here; it occurs three times in these verses I have read. This connection comes again in Romans 15:8-12. Here there is the same kind of movement. At the beginning of verse 9 Paul says, “*So that...*” In verse five Paul said, “...*so that* with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In verse 7 he says, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, *in order to* bring praise to God.” Then in verses 8 and 9 he says, “For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs *so that* the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy...” It seems that the same pattern of unity leading to greater praise is also here in this last section of our passage as well. What is the context of the book of Romans? That Christ is the Savior to the Jews first, but also to the Greeks or Gentiles. In Romans chapters 9, 10, and 11 Paul says that the Gentiles have been grafted in. In the early church the major controversy was whether or not the Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to become full members of the church. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was all about that. Even prior to that, in Acts chapter 6, there were Hebrew-speaking Jewish-Christian widows and Greek-speaking Jewish-Christian widows. And there was dispute and disharmony over who was getting preference when the church gave them food. The potential for the church to be divided over some of these issues, even just among Jewish Christians was (from a human standpoint) huge. Let us assume the church divided over that. How would the promise to Abraham the patriarch—that all the nations will be blessed through him—have come to fruition? You see, the division in the early Christian church could have meant that the Gentiles would never have praised God because the Gospel would never have reached them—as the result of petty controversies within the Jewish-Christian church. (Of course, this is from a human perspective. God was in control and He did not let it happen.)

Is not that what often happens? I have been in congregations when we have had some serious issues that were dividing us and I was actually hoping there would not be any visitors present. This is because visitors are good at detecting divisiveness, I think. You may have experienced this yourself, when you have walked into a church and said, “Wow. This church has issues. I do not know what they are, but I know they have them. Look at those cold stares, and that woman sitting against the wall.” I think the unity of the people of God as they gather to worship is vital not only for the praise to God but also for other people being added to the praise of God, like the Gentiles in the early church. Let us read Romans 15:9-12:

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written:

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing hymns to your name.” Again, it says,
“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” And again,
“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and sing praises to him, all you peoples.” And again, Isaiah says,
“The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
the Gentiles will hope in him.”

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Because Christ became a servant to the Jews, who rejected Him, then what happened? This is the pattern of Christ: loving and accepting even in the face of rejection. This opens the door for the praise of the Gentiles. God's goal for worship is made clear in Revelation. Look at Revelation 5:9 and 14, for example. His goal is that people from every tribe and tongue and language and people would gather around the throne of God and praise Him in unity, saying, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain." This is what Christ came to accomplish. Therefore He will not ultimately allow our divisiveness, pettiness, and harboring of bitterness to get in the way of Him accomplishing His purpose. But if we want to be worshiping in a way that is honoring to God, we must work at getting rid of those things that bring tension, divisiveness, and sinful ways of relating to one another. This should be part of our desire and goal for worship, and it should characterize the way we care for people, calling people into a deeper unity that transcends the things we have differences on along the way.

In both the churches I served we had a number of people who schooled their children at home, a number of people who sent their kids to Christian schools, and a number of people who had their kids in public schools. These three groups were all in the same congregation. The potential for divisiveness over the issue of proper methods of education was huge. One of the ways I tried to maintain unity was to say, "Every parent is called to raise his or her children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. God has given to parents the primary responsibility of the nurturing and educating of their children, and they are accountable before God as to how they do that." Can parents be nurturing and educating their children well in all three of these situations—home schooling them or sending them to Christian or public schools? I think they can be. I think in each of those situations there are extremes that should be avoided. There are some parents who think, "This is not only the right way for me to parent my children, but it is also the right way for all parents to parent their children." Thus dealing with this issue always had to be done with delicacy, always reminding ourselves that the ones who are responsible ultimately for Eric and Susan's children are not Beth and me. It is Eric and Susan. Now, Beth and I may want to come alongside Eric and Susan to encourage and exhort them. We might explain to them why we think it would be better if they had their children in a different situation than they currently do. But that should be done in a loving way, with mutual respect and a recognition that before God Eric and Susan need to make these decisions on how to rear their children. I cannot make those decisions for them.

In my church we would do something in corporate public worship as a way of showing our unity on this issue. This was an idea I got from Jerram Barrs when I took a class from him in 1991. Every Sunday before school began in the fall I would invite all the public school teachers, all the Christian school teachers, and all those who were schooling their children at home in our congregation to come up front. Then I would ask the elders to come up. We would pray for all the teachers in the congregation. I always held my breath, hoping everyone would come up and participate in that, and they did. It was a tangible reminder that our unity is in something deeper than where we have our children in school. We can even be passionate about our views on education without that being divisive for our brothers and sisters in Christ. I think there are ways of addressing controversy, potential controversy, or even divisions, from the pulpit. We can do this in our prayer time or as we come together to the Lord's Table—these different elements of worship lend themselves to unifying the church around the core issues of the Gospel.

I am thrilled to be in the PCA, but my first identity is not that I am a PCA teaching elder. My first identity is that I belong to Christ. My second identity is that I am part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is far larger than the PCA. This is reflected in the phrase from the Nicene Creed, "I believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church." The word "catholic" there does not mean "Roman

Catholic,” rather it means “universal.” But think about that statement: “One holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” What am I saying when I recite that? I am saying that the church is one, the church is pure—holy and apostolic, rooted in the truth of God. I believe in the purity of the church. But I also believe that the church is one and universal—I believe in the unity of the church. We are to be committed at the same time to the unity and the purity of the church. There come times when the expression of the church, the denomination we are in, may no longer attempt to be pure. Then we may have to break unity for the sake of purity. But there are other times when we have to hang in there and continue in a denomination that is hopefully pure in the essentials, but that is uncomfortable and may be eroding in many areas. But we want to be one, we want to give expression to the oneness in the church. In a fallen world, those things that are meant to be one and united may at times rub against each other. Sometimes when the church has broken fellowship over issues of Gospel purity, they then some years later break again over issues that do not really concern Gospel purity. That becomes, I think, a disunity that is not pleasing to God.

If our passion is to worship God the way He wants to be worshiped, our first question is not “How long should the sermon be?” There is an appropriate time and place to discuss that, and we will. But God wants our worship to be joined to Christ, He wants it to be from the heart, He wants it to be in unity with the others around—that is the room we are in, and Christ is with us. Now we can turn our attention to the elements of worship, how to arrange them, what kind of music to sing, how often to have the Lord’s Supper, and all those other things that are important things to be worked through in every church context. But let us not jump right in without first seeking to understand what it means to worship in Spirit and in truth. This is a broad, sweeping, overarching thing that is important to the heart of God. I think the unity of His worshipers is very near to the heart of God. No matter how close in technicalities our worship may be to what the Lord prescribes in Scripture, if we worship in divisiveness the Lord will hear our clamoring and divisiveness. Ultimately the Lord will overcome those things, and we are never perfectly united. But I think there is a huge responsibility here for us to seek unity of the worshipers in order to praise God, in order to glorify Him, and in order that others will be added to the praise of God, like the Gentiles in the early church—outsiders becoming insiders.