

## **Gospel-Centered Worship**

Let us pray.

*Father, we thank You for the wisdom and insights that You have been giving us. I thank You for these students as they ask questions and follow up on things I have been saying. It takes me to a deeper place of understanding and explanation. It creates more questions to explore, driving me, and hopefully all of us, back to Your Word with a desire for even greater illumination by Your Spirit. Father, help us to be those who never assume we have arrived and know all things in any area. Help us delight in being shown more and more of the beauty, wonder, and glory of who You are and of what You have done, are doing, and will do in the lives of Your people—past, present, and future. Father, help us now as we think through in more detail what this idea of Gospel shape or Gospel-centeredness to worship is about. Teach us in ways that will equip us and help us to be men and women who—to whatever degree we are involved in the planning, shaping, and leading of worship now and in the future—would do so with a love for You. Help us also love the good news of the Gospel that never grows old but is fresh, new, and ever deepening in its reality and our grasp of it and our living out of it. Lord, we pray this now in Jesus' name. Amen.*

When Beth (my wife) and I went to Bulgaria in January 2006 we led a week-long conference for pastors and their wives in the Evangelical Congregational Church of Bulgaria. This was the first Protestant church there in the 1860s. It is the denomination that our Mission to the World missionaries are working with now. They had a gathering up in a mountain retreat hotel. It was wonderful. We ate all our meals with them for a week. They would invite us up to their rooms at 10:00 at night to talk with them and pray with them. Some of their pastors had experienced real persecution during the time that it was controlled by the communists. It was an amazing experience to be there. I was talking a lot through the week about Gospel-centered worship. It dawned on me that I needed to clarify exactly what I meant by the Gospel when I used the word “Gospel-centered” and connected it to worship. Maybe I should take a moment now to explain that and give some passages that form that idea and understanding. Is the Gospel the right place to be centered when we think about planning worship?

Let us go over some key Gospel passages. Most of them use the word “Gospel,” But some do not. In compiling this, I found myself going to the beginning of Mark’s Gospel and the beginning of Paul’s letters. They set the overarching picture of what the rest of the Gospel of Mark is about or what Paul’s letter to the Romans is about. I began to sense that this is pretty confirming that this is where the Word of God centers us. Look at Mark 1:15, “The time has come,” [Jesus] said, “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news [Gospel]!” This is the very beginning, which was the marking out of His baptism and temptation and the calling of His first disciples. He comes announcing the Gospel of the kingdom. It is about the good news of what God is doing. Look at Romans 1:1-2 and 9, “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures [...] God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son.” I hope it never happens (it has not so far), and I cannot imagine, getting tired of the words Gospel, grace, the covenant, or God’s kingdom. There are these overarching, rich, biblical words that are filled with the heart of what God in Christ has done for us and is doing through us. Philippians 1:3-7 says, “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with

me.” The introductory and concluding words of these books often refer to the Gospel. The word “Gospel” is not used at the very end of the book of Acts, but it certainly seems to be implied here. Acts 28:30-31 says, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” If you look at the Greek in this, you will see that the book of Acts ends with Paul in prison but the words are “without hindrance.” The Gospel of the kingdom is being boldly preached even though Paul is in chains or at least under house arrest.

When we use the idea of Gospel shape, it is referring to how God relates to us as His people, and this is to be reflected in the way we plan and lead worship services. It includes the holy character of God as the one into whose presence we are entering and drawing near. Think of the Old Testament temple and the different courts, the holy place, the holy of holies, and how to draw near to God. Think of coming before His heavenly tabernacle and most holy place. We always come reminding ourselves, particularly toward the beginning of the worship service, into whose presence we are coming. He is the one who invites us. He is loving, kind, and accepting, but not in any way that diminishes His full character. He is holy. We come not only remembering, rejoicing, and professing Who God is in His character, but we come confessing who we are apart from Christ. We need to remember who we are even now in Christ with our remaining sin. A worship service should mention something about our sin, our falling short, our need to seek His forgiveness, the great distance between God and us, or Him being holy and us not being holy. If it fails to do that it misses the mark of this Gospel shape. God is holy; we are sinful men and women. Then the gracious provision of redemption and everything we need for salvation and life is found in Christ. This appropriate emphasis on God’s gracious provision of all things we need in Christ is something that comes through in our preaching and in our coming to the Lord’s Table. We are to be those who come as sinners into the presence of a holy God. He reminds us and grants afresh to us the refreshing grace of the Gospel in Christ. We come ready to be instructed, to be made to be more like Christ, and to be equipped to live for His glory in all of the varied callings that we have as His people. We do this in the empowering grace of that same Gospel. The Gospel that saves us is the Gospel that empowers us to be more like Christ and to live for His glory.

There are several passages in Scripture that seem to bring this pattern together. One is Isaiah 6:1-8. It is one of the best-known passages of Scripture that can be used to help give this Gospel shape. At the beginning it says, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of His glory.” Isaiah is saying, “Woe is me! I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” He is basically saying that if this is who God is and this is who I am and that is all there is to the story, then I am ruined. But the good news of the Gospel is that is not all there is to the story. In Isaiah 6 “one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’” Ultimately this represents the atoning work of Christ on our behalf. It cleans not only our lips but the heart from which unclean words, thoughts, and deeds flow forth. Then in verse 8 it says, “I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” This transformed sinner is able to respond to God’s call to go wherever He wants him to go and to be whom He wants him to be. He is able to live out this new life in Christ. It is a Gospel-transformed and ever transforming kind of life.

Exodus 24 has that amazing passage about seeing God on the mountain and living. They ate and drank with God. If you look at that passage, you see this similar pattern where the people are prepared to worship God in His holiness. They are to worship at a distance. They built an altar and prepared the burnt offerings and sacrifices. There is a preparation for entering into the presence of God, who is holy

and at a distance from us. There is atonement for sin that is necessary in all of the burnt and fellowship offerings. The blood is sprinkled on the people and on the altar. Atonement is necessary. Verse 7 says, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey." But the only way they can do that is as a fruit of what God does in them. They are the ones whom He has called out of Egypt and given these good gifts to. God's provision in the sacrifices and blood of the covenant is represented here. There is a desire to live a transformed life in response to God's call. And there is a fellowship meal with God Himself present. Part of what comes from this is they are called out of Egypt to this mountain. God had told Moses that His sign to him was that after He had delivered them they would worship Him on this mountain. It is not the end of the story, though. It is not just about getting to the mountain and worshiping God. They are partly transformed in the presence of God. If you momentarily set aside the postponement of going into the promise land, part of what is happening in Exodus 24 is getting them ready to go take the land. It is to be a land where God dwells in the midst of them. That does not happen immediately because of the disciplining and pruning that happens in the desert.

There are a few places in Scripture that are a very significant part of the drama. Certainly Exodus 24 is one of those in the Old Testament, and Acts 2 is one of those in the New Testament. It is about Pentecost and what follows from that. Peter's sermon, beginning in Acts 2:22, reflects on God's holiness, man's sinfulness, God's provision in Christ, and a call to repentance and faith. Then the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to dwell in them that they might live a transformed life. You see this same pattern in Peter's sermon. It then results in the practice of the early church where they would gather in homes with a sense of awe before a holy God. They broke bread, reminding themselves of His provision, and awaiting the apostles' instructions as to how to live out this transformed life in the power of the Gospel.

Revelation 4 and 5 is at the other end of the story. Revelation 4:8-11 talks about the angelic beings who never stop saying night and day, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come." It picks up on the same song and theme from Isaiah 6. Revelation 5:2-4 says, "I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?' But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside." There is nobody worthy in the presence of this thrice-holy God to open this particular scroll. Then beginning in verse 5 God provides the Lamb who was slain as being the one who is now worthy to open the scroll. "Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.' Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth." He takes the scroll. Then we see in verses 9 and 10 that those who are purchased by His blood from every tribe, language, people, and nation are now able to join in the worship of God. An ever-increasing concentric circle of worshipers, which includes the elders, all the people, the angels (10,000 times 10,000), and every creature in heaven and earth, goes out from the throne, joining in the praise and worship of God. We not only worship, but we are made to be a kingdom and priesthood to serve our God and reign on the earth. There is fruit from the holy God having His Son slain in order to open the scroll that no one was worthy to open. Now people who are in Him, and are able, reign and rule with Him. In my opinion, this is restorative of what Adam and Eve and intended to be at the very beginning. They are under Christ and ruling over the earth.

These passages show a pattern that is a very biblical pattern. In each of these examples, if they are not specific worship times, there are worship things happening in and around them. In Exodus 24 and Isaiah 6 they are in the temple or in a heavenly place of worship. They are gathered at Pentecost and continue

in the worship of God in the early church.

There are a couple of very important things that flow from that. Gospel-centered worship includes Gospel-centered preaching. Whatever else you hear me say in this course, do not ever hear me diminishing the importance and centrality of Gospel-centered preaching. That is something that we hold in high regard at Covenant Seminary. We require a number of curriculum hours for homiletics in the Master of Divinity program. Gospel-centered preaching is at the heart of Gospel-centered worship. Worship and the Reformation of the church included the preaching of the true Gospel, congregational participation in the means of grace and growth, right administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and transformed lives lived to God's glory in everything. Christ-centered preaching is central to worship. It presents the Gospel from Scripture that includes the holy character of God, the sinfulness of men and women, the gracious provision of redemption in Christ, and the empowering grace to live like Christ. So good, hearty, robust Gospel-centered preaching has that shape to it in the sermon itself. Anywhere you teach from in Scripture you should show how the passage shows our deep need for what only God can provide in His grace. Or you will focus on what God in His grace has provided in carrying us forward in the story toward Christ and healing, redemption, and restoration.

What I am trying to say in this class is that Gospel-centered worship that includes Gospel-centered preaching does not rely on the sermon exclusively to carry the weight of the Gospel in the worship service. It has been unfair to the element of preaching to put all the pressure on the sermon almost exclusively. It has at least been elevated way above everything else. As central and important as preaching is, God has not structured Gospel-centered worship with all the means of grace and the elements of worship in such a way that all the weight has to rest on the preaching. For most of us who are not as gifted as our president, Dr. Bryan Chapell, that is good news. The weight of the Gospel-centeredness of worship relies in a significant way on Gospel-centered preaching, but it is not exclusively carried by how I preach. The Gospel is not carried in that alone. I should strive to be all that I can be as a preacher. When I get ready for Sunday morning Gospel-centered worship, if I am the one who is regularly preaching, I need to be thinking carefully and planning and spending and investing enough time into it—I need to be a good steward of that privilege and responsibility. But I also need to see the whole of the worship service. The goal of a worship service is not for me to preach a good sermon so that people will say to me, "Pastor, you preached a good sermon today." It is good to long for the Holy Spirit to take the sermon I preached and impact people in a way that their lives are changed by the Gospel. But the goal of a Gospel-centered worship service, from the call to worship to the benediction, is for the people of God who have gathered to be impacted by being in the presence of God. The fullness of the Gospel should impact them from start to finish. This powerful convergence of the various means of grace that He has put together in a worship service should impact people.

I do not want to diminish the importance of the sermon. The way to get Gospel-centered worship in all of its aspects is not to diminish the sermon and bring it down to the level of the prayers and the Lord's Supper. The way to get a fuller Gospel-centered worship service is to elevate the other elements to the place of the sermon or at least closer to it. It is just as important to spend time and prayerfully think through how to craft those aspects of the service. The prayers, the Lord's Supper, the songs, the Scripture readings, and the testimonies are not in the worship service to serve the sermon. They are in the worship service for the same reason the sermon is there: to serve the Gospel of Christ. That in no way diminishes the importance of the sermon. In fact it makes the sermon more likely to make an impact for the Gospel. It is buoyed up by these other things that are lifted up. The longer I live the more I love to preach. But the longer I live the more I realize how much I love to tell people what I have just said about worship. I want others to see the value and importance of all of the means of grace that converge in a worship service for the glory of God and the building up of His people.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism questions 88-99 is the section that talks about the means of grace. Question 88 is this: “What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption? The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are His ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer, all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.” It does not elevate any one above the other; it is all of them together. There are some people who say that what we need is an emphasis on the ordinary means of grace that God has appointed for the growth of His people. The place where those come together is in corporate public worship. God brings together the means of grace and growth into corporate public worship. This includes the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4), the preaching of the Word, (2 Timothy 4), prayer, the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3, Ephesians 5), baptism and the Lord’s Supper, fellowship and mutual edification of believers, professions or declarations of faith (1 Timothy 3:16), testimonies of God’s grace (1 Corinthians 14:26), and offerings. All of these things converge together in corporate public worship for the purpose of transforming the people of God into greater Christ-likeness. That is what we should be praying for and longing for in ourselves and the flock that we are leading in worship. Some of these things we can get apart from corporate worship. We can read the Bible on our own; we can pray on our own. We can have fellowship with other believers in a way that is not Lord’s Day corporate public worship. Some of these are appointed for corporate public worship, like the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the public reading of the Word, and praying for God’s assembled people together. There are dimensions of being gathered in corporate public worship in which some of these means of grace have been given for that purpose primarily. It makes it a unique gathering with a powerful converging of the means of grace. Some of these things can happen on a smaller scale, but they are without the full complement of those means of grace apart from corporate public worship.

I have alluded to some things that Tim Keller brings out in the beginning of his chapter in Carson’s book. It is that Calvin saw worship as being primarily transformational, to the glory of God. On the other hand, Zwingli and others saw worship as primarily informational, hoping it would change lives, too. Calvin felt that in the worship service itself God’s goal is to shape, change, and rearrange people to be more like Christ. It is amazing what happens when you enter worship with that expectation. In coming to Saint Louis I have more opportunity to sit among the congregation during a worship service rather than be up front preaching or leading all the time, as I did in pastoral ministry. When I consciously remember to ask the Lord to change me to be more like Christ in this worship service this morning, there are times I am consciously aware of Him doing that. He convicts me of sin, I have a greater depth of rejoicing in what God in Christ has done for me, and I have more insight into things like how to love me wife better. There is a sense of the Spirit working with the means of grace that has richness, depth, intimacy, and a relational dynamic to it. I am not just coming to get information. I am coming to meet with God and His people for the sake of being more like Jesus. That has been an amazing difference in the way I approach worship as a participant. It has been a great blessing.

The distinct richness is part of the corporate nature of worship. We are together meeting with God along with others of His family. Hebrews 2 and 8 refer to Jesus coming into the corporate setting. It is not just that the means of grace converge. They converge under His leadership. Every aspect of it He is leading. He is declaring God’s name, He is singing God’s praise, He is inviting us to the table, and He is taking us by the hand and sitting with us at the table. We need to remember that Christ is personally present and leading in every aspect of it. He is delighting in us, which enables us to delight in one another. Imagine Jesus standing and singing a song with us and saying to the Father, “Here am I at this local church.” Jesus loves to worship where you worship—even more than you love worshiping where you worship. He looks forward to coming to church where you worship even more than you do on your best

Sunday. Just imagine Him saying in the midst of a congregational song, “Here am I, Lord, and the children You have given Me.” How could I not delight in these people whom I struggle to love well during the week if that is the tone and the heart of the service? There is a synergy that happens when we are together, He is there with us, and these means of grace come together. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts that come together. It is covenant renewal. That does not happen when I am by myself off in the mountains with a Bible. Greater intimacy with God may happen there. But there is something about covenant renewal happening only when I am together with others in the presence of God with His appointed means of grace, His personal presence, and the power of the Spirit at work. The longing of David in some of the psalms to be able to be back in the house of the Lord and in His presence is something that we might understand if we are separated for a season from being able to worship with the people of God. We should feel like there is something drastically missing in our lives. It is hard to explain, and it is outside our normal categories of thinking, particularly in the West. For lack of a better analogy, it is almost like those who wanted to somehow touch the hem of His robe for the benefit of His presence even though He may not be directly looking at them. He might be ministering to someone else, and as He is passing by there is a certain blessing that comes out to others who are gathered there. There is an appropriate mystery of how God meets with His people when we gather in worship that transcends our comprehension but changes us nonetheless.

Sometimes I ask the question, is Christ’s presence in a worship service different in any way when we do not have the Lord’s Supper? We bump up again against the limits of our understanding of the Trinity and the incarnation. There is a sense in which you would say God the Son, the glorified God-man, is seated at the right hand of God the Father in terms of location. Yet somehow He comes to meet with us distinctively as God the Son but somehow through the agency of the Holy Spirit. But He is really there. If you read Calvin on how Christ is present at the Lord’s Supper, you know He is uniquely at the right hand of the Father, but He is also personally present. It is a joining of heaven and earth. In a sense He takes us to be where He is, according to my understanding of Hebrews 12. We go to be where He is, and He comes to be where we are. We have been seated with Christ in the heavenly places, according to Ephesians 2. Yet God the Father is also here. He is everywhere present, but He is joining His covenantal presence. There are ways that He has promised to be present that are uniquely associated with the Lamb who was slain on our behalf. It opens the way for sinners to come into the presence of a holy God with delight, intimacy, and transforming grace. We are then sent out as changed people. That covenantal presence is a way to think about it, perhaps.

God’s goal for us is to become like Christ. Based on Romans 8:28-29, God’s will for your life is that you would be conformed to the likeness of Christ. Who you marry, if you are to be married, how many kids you have, if any, where you are to live, what your job description is... God is more concerned about those things than you are. But they are still secondary to His expressed will for you, which is to be conformed to the likeness of Christ in all those things. As I read earlier from Philippians 1, He relentlessly, covenantally (it is sealed in the blood of Christ) has promised that, having begun that work in you, He will bring it to completion. It is going to happen. Our remaining sin, the world of flesh, and the devil will get in the way and seem to be a hindrance to that. But He overcomes every hindrance for those upon whom He has set His covenant love in Christ, and we will one day be fully conformed to Christ. When I am fully conformed to Christ, I will still be uniquely Mark—compared to the apostle Paul fully conformed to Christ. We will still be fully conformed to Christ, but we will be uniquely who we are as both made in the image of God and being remade in the image of Christ. The uniqueness, the beauty, the specific gem that I am and that He is will both reflect the glory of Christ but still uniquely reflect who we are. We are to take hold of, by faith, all of the means of grace that God uses toward that ultimate end. We are to try and grow in that. The responsibility is put on us to be diligent and persevere. It is a fruit of His transforming grace and indwelling Holy Spirit. Gospel-centered worship consists of

both Gospel-centered preaching and Gospel-centered non-preaching elements. I long to see Covenant Seminary graduates who are not only very effective at Christ-centered, Gospel-centered preaching, but who are also very effective Christ-centered, Gospel-centered worship planners and leaders. Whether I have two hours in the curriculum or nine hours in the curriculum, I want to keep working toward that end.

We will finish our lesson today with worship and the Gospel storyline. Every worship service will have the unique Gospel storyline. Every worship service starts somewhere and goes somewhere. The progression of where the service is going, from being called into His presence to being commissioned and sent out to live for Him the rest of the week, should have a Gospel shape and Gospel storyline to it. The storyline needs to be rooted in and a fruit of the biblical Gospel storyline. We are living in Act 5, which is missing and unwritten. There have been many things leading up to it. And we have the rest of the story in terms of the new heavens and the new earth. But we are living between Pentecost and the second coming. The story is still unfolding as far as the implications of the Gospel that are being worked out in our lives and the congregations we serve. We cannot forget where we come from, so this actual worship service needs to be rooted in the biblical story of the Gospel. That is part of evaluating the biblical content and Gospel shape that we talked about earlier. It also flows into the lives of people who have their own Gospel storyline. What is your story of how the Gospel is unfolding and working out in your life? Every time we gather for corporate public worship we are the people of God coming together who have a history that is rooted in the biblical Gospel story. We each have a life to live for the glory of God that has its own unique storyline to it.

In terms of preaching, every sermon has to be rooted in the Scripture. Recognize that in this moment God is working through the dynamic of preaching to touch and shape your life. Then it has a directional movement into which you are called, into which you live your life, and into the unfolding drama of His story of your own life. We need to think through songs to sing, prayers to pray, Scripture passages to read, and stories to tell in our sermons. We need to prepare for the manner in which we invite people to partake of the Lord's Supper, and we need to remind them of the significance of the Lord's Supper. We should think about what we say before we do a baptism, calling upon people to remember their baptism—whether they can consciously remember it or not. Our leading of worship has a three-dimensional aspect to it. I must be faithful to Scripture in everything. I have to be able to remember where I am in this worship service. It is progressing somewhere into the lives of people in whom God, by His Word and Spirit, is working. I need to consider the selection of a benediction, which one I use to tie into what has just been preached or the coming to the Lord's Table.

I preached at a local church last Sunday from the Romans 15 passage. In the first service I said, "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever" as my benediction. But I was struck as I was preaching and drawing my sermon to an end that Romans 15, the very passage I had preached from that was calling people to unity, has its own benediction within it. So I changed it for the second service. I said Romans 15:5, "May the God who gives you 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." Hopefully my deciding to do that was with some sensitivity to the Spirit's leading in the moment. I had been calling people to seek out those whom they are not reconciled with and be reconciled to them. Maybe the Holy Spirit used me taking that Scripture statement of a benediction in that moment in the second service rather than the other one in some small way that I do not know. I was being faithful to the Bible; it is a Bible benediction. I was being faithful to the Gospel storyline of the service. Maybe He took that into the life of somebody by the blessing of the Holy Spirit accompanying the benediction in the commissioning. That might have made a difference Sunday afternoon in the way

someone related to his or her spouse. Maybe what sealed it, impacted them, and changed them in the moment of the worship service was not my great preaching of the passage but my rereading of that portion as a benediction. God can do what He wants and how He wants. I am called to be faithful, and I think using that as a benediction was more faithful in that moment to these three stories than the one I used in the first service. That does not mean that the first service was a failure. It just means that God was still working in me to see something I had not seen in the first service. I do not know. That is elevating a benediction to a place of potential importance in the lives of the gathered people. God may use it in that moment to bring everything together from the service and send them out on their way into the story He is writing in their lives. I may or may not know anything about those stories. It points out the weightiness of the whole service and yet the privilege we have to help shape that service by giving importance to all of the means of grace that converge together in the service.