

**Our Inestimable Privilege:  
Full, Conscious, Active Participation in Christian Worship  
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*Turning our attention from what our ministers and musicians do to what we as worshipers do. . . Turning our attention from debating what should happen in worship (a worthy discussion) to reflecting on how we can best participate in what does happen. . .*

Let us engrave this useful lesson upon our hearts, that we should consider it the great end of our existence to be found numbered among the worshipers of God; and that we should avail ourselves of the inestimable privilege of the stated assemblies of the Church, which are necessary helps to our infirmity, and means of mutual excitement and encouragement. By these, and our common sacraments, the Lord who is one God, and who designed that we should be one in him, is training us up together in the hope of eternal life, and in the united celebration of his holy name.

—John Calvin, Commentary on Psalm 52:8

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work. . . . The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration.

—Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vatican II

*THEMES (to be selected from this list)*

*Hearing the Beauty of the Congregation's Voice*  
*Perceiving the Beauty of God*  
*Perceiving the Action of the Triune God of Grace*  
*Aching for Home and the Cry of Lament*  
*The Grittiness of Worship*  
*Connecting Worship and Life*

*EXERCISES*

*Questions to Ask in the Car on Sunday Morning*  
*Things to Say to Your Ministers and Musicians After Church on Sunday*  
*Parent as Mentors for Children's Participation in Worship*

*For Further Reflection*

1. Leanne Van Dyk, ed., *A More Profound Alleluia: Worship and Theology in Harmony* (Eerdmans 2005)
2. Cornelius Plantinga and Sue R. Rozeboom, *Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking About Worship Today* (Eerdmans, 2003)
3. *The Worship Sourcebook (Faith Alive/Baker Books, 2004)*
4. [www.calvin.edu/worship](http://www.calvin.edu/worship)

## Hearing the Beauty of the Congregation's (and Choir's!) Voice

On Sundays... we sing a psalm of David or some other prayer taken from the New Testament. The psalm or prayer is sung by everyone together, men as well as women with beautiful unanimity, which is something beautiful to behold. For you must understand that each one has a music book in his hand; that is why they cannot lose touch with one another. Never did I think that it could be as pleasing and delightful as it is. For five or six days at first, as I looked upon this little company, exiled from countries everywhere for having upheld the honor of God and His Gospel, I would begin to weep, not at all from sadness, but from joy at hearing them sing so heartily, and, as they sang, giving thanks to the Lord that He had led them to a place where His name is honored and glorified. No one could believe the joy which one experiences when one is singing the praises and wonders of the Lord in the mother tongue as one sings them here.

--An Antwerp resident, who attended Easter worship in Calvin's former congregation in Strasbourg, mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Alfred Erichson, *L'Église française de Strasbourg au seizième siècle d'après des documents inédits* (Strasbourg: Librairie C. F. Schmidt, 1886), 21-22, quoted in Garside, "The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music, 1536-1543," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 4 (1969): 18.

How often, making music, we have found  
a new dimension in the world of sound,  
as worship moved us to a more profound  
alleluia!

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Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. **2** Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendor. **3** The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters. . . . The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!" **10** The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. **11** May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!

—Psalm 29

### Directions For Singing

- Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.
- Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.
- Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.
- Sing in time. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.

--From John Wesley's *Select Hymns*, 1761

**The Beauty of God:  
“Seeing Through” not “Looking At” Our Acts of Worship**

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. **2** So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. **3** Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. **4** So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. **5** My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, [Fl26](#) and my mouth praises you with joyful lips **6** when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; **7** for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

—Psalm 63

We ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.

—Psalm 48:9:

“It was not enough for the faithful, in those days, to depend upon the Word of God, and to engage in those ceremonial services which he required, unless, aided by *external* symbols, they *elevated* their *minds* above these, and yielded to God *spiritual* worship. God, indeed, gave real tokens of his presence in that visible sanctuary, but not for the purpose of binding the senses and thoughts of his people to earthly elements; he wished rather that these *external* symbols should serve as *ladders*, by which the faithful might *ascend* even to heaven. The design of God from the commencement in the appointment of the sacraments, and all the outward exercises of religion, was to consult the infirmity and weak capacity of his people. Accordingly, even at the present day, the true and proper use of them is, to assist us in seeking God *spiritually* in his heavenly glory, and not to occupy our *minds* with the things of this world, or keep them fixed in the vanities of the flesh.”

—John Calvin, Commentary on Psalm 9:11

“Thus, we must note that when God declares himself to us, we must not cling to any earthly thing, but must elevate our senses above the world, and lift ourselves up by faith to his eternal glory. In sum, God comes down to us so that then we might go up to him. That is why the sacraments are compared to the steps of a ladder. For as I have said, if we want to go there, alas, we who not have wings; we are so small that we cannot make it. God, therefore, must come down to seek us. But when he has come down, it is not to make us dull-witted; it is not to make us imagine that he is like us. Rather, it is so that we might go up little by little, by degrees, as we climb up a ladder one rung at the time.”

-- John Calvin, Sermon on 2 Samuel 6

*Note: “superstition” here for Calvin is not merely pagan reliance on a wooden god. It is a sin of the mind or spirit. It is misplaced attention in regard to its object of contemplation; it is the failure to attend to the spiritual significance of physical action. Tongue-in-cheek, we might call it something like a “Liturgical Attention Deficit Disorder”—something to which we all are prone.*

Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

--From John Wesley’s *Select Hymns*, 1761

## **Perceiving the Action of the Triune God of Grace: How Not to Worship as a Deist**

C. S. Lewis addressed this question of how Christians conceive of God in a brief commentary on the doctrine of the Trinity. Eager to explain how Trinitarian theology is not merely abstract or mathematical, but can be experiential, Lewis explained,

You may ask 'If we cannot imagine a three-personal Being, what is the good of talking about Him?' Well, there isn't any good talking about Him. The thing that matters is being actually drawn into that three-personal life, and that may begin any time—tonight, if you like. What I mean is this. An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his [or her] prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if a Christian, he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God—that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying—the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of the three-personal being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary Christian is saying his prayers.<sup>1</sup>

This is a different and altogether remarkable way of imagining God. In this way of thinking, God is not only the One before us, “up there” to receive our praise. God is also “alongside us” in the person of Jesus, perfecting our otherwise imperfect songs and prayers. God is also at work “within us,” prodding us, prompting us, encouraging us, and even—when we are unable to pray—praying through us (Rom. 8:26). “It is one experience of God,” as Sarah Coakley describes it, “but God as simultaneously (i) doing the praying in me, (ii) receiving that prayer, and (iii) in that exchange, consented to in me, inviting me into the Christic life of redeemed sonship.”<sup>2</sup>

This is a vision of God that is, we might say, geographically complex. God inhabits three places in our imagination at the same time (which is, of course, harder for us to imagine than for God to accomplish!). Though it would be wrongly self-centered to say that we are at “the center” of this activity, it may be helpful to picture ourselves right there “in the middle” of it. Or to ponder Robert Jenson’s evocative image: “The particular God of Scripture does not just stand over against us; he envelops us.”<sup>3</sup> In this vision, we still pray and sing “to” each divine person “holy, holy, holy. . . blessed Trinity!”, but we are also aware that we pray and sing “through Christ,” “in the power of the Spirit.”

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1943), 143.

<sup>2</sup>Sarah Coakley, “Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity.”

<sup>3</sup>Robert Jenson, *Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 51.

## **The Grittiness of Worship: Praise as the Church's Anti-Idolatry Campaign**

Every act of praise is a strong act of negation as well as affirmation. Every time we sing praise to the triune God, we are asserting our opposition to anything that would attempt to stand in God's place. Every hymn of praise is a little anti-idolatry campaign, as Walter Brueggemann explains: "The affirmation of Yahweh always contains a polemic against someone else. . . It may be that the [exiles] will sing such innocuous-sounding phrases as 'Glory to God in the highest,' or 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow.' Even those familiar phrases are polemical, however, and stake out new territory for the God now about to be aroused to new caring."<sup>4</sup> When we sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" we are also saying "Down with the gods from whom no blessings flow."

Given how busy and distracted we all are most days, when we sing in praise, our interior conversation may often go something like this (interior conversation in parentheses):

Praise God from whom all blessings flow (yes, the stock market really has done well this week).

Praise Him all creatures here below (though, come to think of it, we could be singing a little better if our praise team or organist would only go a little faster today).

Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts (though it is difficult to maintain belief in angels in our secular culture).

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (what a nice symmetrical way to end a song of praise). Amen.

What we need to recover is the experience of songs of praise—regardless of musical style—that function more like this:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow (and not any lifeless idol, like the stock market or shopping mall).

Praise Him all creatures here below (because this God is far better than anything we could create from our own imaginations!).

Praise Him above all ye heavenly hosts (because even in heaven there is only one worthy of praise!).

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (because it is the Triune God that both promises and effects life-giving redemption). Amen."<sup>5</sup>

When we start a worship service with a song or hymn of praise, we are pivoting toward God and away from anything that displaces God. It's one of the basic "dance moves" of the Christian life. It's why there is no such thing as an ordinary praise song.

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<sup>4</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among the Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 128.

<sup>5</sup>The rhetorical device is adapted from Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 127.

## Getting Heart and Mind Properly Connected

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive. **15** What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also

--I Corinthians 14:14-15

I used to be much more fascinated by the pleasures of sound than the pleasures of smell. I was enthralled by them, but you broke my bonds and set me free. I admit that I still find some enjoyment in the music of hymns, which are alive with your praises, when I hear them sung by well-trained, melodious voices, but I do not enjoy it so much that I can not tear myself away. I can leave it when I wish. But if I am not to turn a deaf ear to music, which is the setting for the words which give it life, I must allow it a position of some honor in my heart, and I find it difficult to assign it to its proper place. For sometimes I feel that I treat it with more honor than it deserves. I realize that when they are sung, these sacred words stir my mind to greater religious fervor and kindle in me a more ardent flame of piety than they would if they were not sung; and I also know that there are particular modes in song and in the voice, corresponding to my various emotions and able to stimulate them because of some mysterious relationship between the two. But I ought not to allow my mind to be paralyzed by the gratification of my senses, which often leads it astray. For the senses are not content to take second place. Simply because I allow them their due, as adjuncts to reason, they attempt to take precedence and forge ahead of it, with the result that I sometimes sin in this way, but am not aware of it until later.

Sometimes, too, from over-anxiety to avoid this particular trap I make the mistake of being too strict. When this happens, I have no wish but to exclude from my ears, and from the ears of the Church as well, all the melody of those lovely chants to which the Psalms of David are habitually sung; and it seems safer to me to follow the precepts which I remember often having heard ascribed to Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who used to oblige the lectors to recite the psalms with such slight modulation of the voice that they seemed to be speaking rather than chanting. But when I remember the tears that I shed on hearing the songs of the Church in the early days, soon after I had recovered my faith, and when I realize that nowadays it is not the singing that moves me but the meaning of the words when they are sung in a clear voice to the most appropriate then, I again acknowledge the great value of this practice. So I waver between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which, as I know from experience, can accrue from singing. Without committing myself to an irrevocable opinion, I am inclined to approve of the custom of singing in church, in order that by indulging the ears weaker spirits may be inspired with feelings of devotion. Yet when I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys, I confess that this is a grievous sin, and at those times I would prefer not to hear the singer.

—St. Augustine, *Confessions*

## Aching for Home and the Cry of Lament

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? 3 My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?" 4 These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. 5 Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help

--Psalm 42:1-5

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

--Romans 8:26

James B. Torrance is particularly concerned with theological schemes that correctly stress "God-humanward movement in Christ" but wrongly imply that "the human-Godward movement is still ours." He contends that this tendency ignores the priesthood of Christ, such that "the only priesthood is our priesthood, the only offering our offering, the only intercessions our intercessions." Torrance maintains that this vision implies that "God throws us back upon ourselves to make our response" and ignores that "God has already provided for us that Response which alone is acceptable to him--the offering made for the whole human race in the life, obedience and passion of Jesus Christ." Torrance argues that this distorted view of worship is functionally unitarian, operating apart from the work on the Holy Spirit and the mediatorship of Christ. For Torrance the key thesis is that *both* "the God-humanward movement and human-Godward relationship" are "freely given to us in Jesus Christ." In his words:

We so stress that God comes to us as God to address us through his Word in preaching, that we short-circuit the real humanity of Christ, the role of the continuing priesthood of Christ in representing us to God, and have a one-sided view of the work of the Spirit. We can then so obtrude our own response to the Word in Pelagian fashion, that we obscure or forget the God-given response made for us by Jesus Christ. It is possible for us so to obtrude our own offering of praise, that we lose sight of the one true offering of praise made for us (Heb. 2:12).<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, Alan Torrance writes: "It is precisely the theological insight that God's grace actually includes the provision of the very response demanded by it that distinguishes Christian worship from religious ritual. Christian worship becomes thus the free participation by the Spirit in something that God perfects on our behalf, whereas worship as religious ritual is a human task, namely on that ultimately can be little more than the vain attempt on the part of finite creatures to approach the 'Transcendent' (whatever they suppose this to mean) and offer some (equally supposedly) requisite attitude" (*Persons in Communion*, 314).

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<sup>6</sup>J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, 18, 7, 43, also 50. 78.

## CONNECTING WORSHIP AND LIFE: Worship as “Rehearsal” and “Soundtrack”

By these, and our common sacraments, the Lord who is one God, and who designed that we should be one in him, is training us up together in the hope of eternal life, and in the united celebration of his holy name.

--John Calvin, Commentary on Psalm 52:8

### Worship as “Practicing the Moves”

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of her own experience as a little girl, learning ballet. She remembers all the time she had to spend practicing the dance moves: “It would have suited me to spend the whole hour admiring myself in front of the mirror, but my teacher kept insisting that I come away from there to learn the basic positions essential to ballet. Under her tutelage, I learned to bend my feet this way and that, sometimes straining so hard I feared my knees would pop from their sockets. [I arched my back, I held my head up, I made perfect O’s with my arms. I stretched and sweated over the positions until my bones ached and my muscles yelled out loud]. Then one day I got to put them all together, bending and rising and sweeping the air like someone to whom gravity no longer applied. I got to dance. . . . That memory sustains me in worship, where I practice the basic positions of faith. They are called *kyrie*, *gloria*, *credo*, and *sanctus* [or praise, confession, thanksgiving, and dedication]. Each one requires my full attention and best efforts; each one teaches me a particular way to move, so that when God invites me to put them all together, I may jump with joy to join the dance”

--Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cowley Press)

### Worship as “Soundtrack”

The way we talk in worship affects the way we talk in the rest of our lives, and vice versa. . . . The words of worship are like stones thrown into the pond; they ripple outward in countless concentric circles, finding ever fresh expression in new places in our lives. . . . Worship is a key element in the church’s ‘language school’ for life. . . . It’s a provocative idea—worship as a soundtrack for the rest of life, the words and music and actions of worship inside the sanctuary playing the background as we live our lives outside, in the world.”

--Thomas G. Long, *Testimony* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), 47-48.

### Worship as Covenantal Speech

Sample habits in a good relationship

1. *Love You.*
2. *Sorry.*
3. *Why?*
4. *Come again? (I’m listening)*
5. *Help.*
6. *Thank You.*
7. *What Can I Do?*
8. *Bless You.*

The Order of Worship

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## EXERCISES

### Questions to Ask in the Car on Sunday Morning

#### On the Way to Church

1. What is the central prayer I am eager to express today?

#### On the Way Home

1. What aspect of God's beauty did I see today?
2. How did today "change my mind" in ways that help me think more scripturally?
3. What was my central prayer in worship today? How did worship expand my prayer life, either in lament, thanksgiving, praise or petition?
4. What song can I hum when I wake up tomorrow morning?

### Things to Say to Your Ministers and Musicians After Church on Sunday

#### Instead of

1. Impressive music today.
2. Very clever sermon.
3. What a nice song.

#### Consider

1. You helped me pray today.
2. That sermon or hymn was not easy, but it was worth it.
3. You let scripture change my mind about something today.
4. I'll be pondering that thought (or humming that tune) all week.

### Parenting Children's Participation in Worship

1. Try coming to church a bit early and find a seat near the front. Stay afterward some Sunday, to look up close at the pulpit, font, and table.
2. Help your child look up the hymns or prayers in your hymnal or worship book prior to the service.
3. Talk with your children at home about what happens at church and why.
4. Make sure that during the greetings or passing of the peace or welcome time that you greet your children. Encourage your children to greet your neighbors, and introduce them to those sitting near you.
5. After church, take home your bulletin or order of worship, and use some of the same scripture readings, prayers, and songs in your family devotions, perhaps after a meal.
6. Help your children participate in the offering by having them place money in the offering plate.
7. Make sure your children can see the especially dramatic moments in worship, such as a baptism or the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Lift them up so that they don't miss those moments of the service.

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*O God, you pour out the spirit of grace and love.  
Deliver us from cold hearts and wandering thoughts,  
that with steady minds and burning zeal,  
we may worship you in spirit and truth. Amen.*