

Celebrating the Resurrection: A Theological Account of Our Common Worship

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What is the purpose of corporate worship? No church is short of people with opinions on what should and should not be done in its meetings. These are often forcefully and, on occasion, helpfully expressed to the pastor, but the question cannot be answered on the basis of personal taste or the selective citation of some of the emphases of the Bible without theological reflection on the apostolic practice of worship. It is worth commenting briefly on the terminology being used since it is easy to be distracted, or derailed entirely, by the issue of the meaning of the word ‘worship’ in the Bible and whether the New Testament use is the same as that of systematic and practical theology. I am not attempting to give a full account of the New Testament understanding of ‘worship’, but, rather, am asking the narrower question of what the apostolic understanding of Christians meeting together on Sunday was and how this should inform our understanding and practice.

In the first section I will outline four truths which are sometimes presented as the sole (or main) reason for our corporate meetings, and discuss the distortion which can occur in the worship of a congregation when one facet of our time together is treated as its whole (or main) purpose. These four aspects are evangelism, teaching, fellowship and religious experience. In the second section I will suggest that when we meet on Sunday in common worship this is to celebrate the resurrection and that, therefore, our time together has an ‘evangelical’, an ‘ethical’ and an ‘eschatological’ focus.

The Half Truths of ‘Biblical Teaching’

Different church traditions tend towards particular emphases in their understanding of what their corporate meetings are for and the problem is not that they promote something which is not in the Bible. In the sense that they each emphasize an aspect of the teaching of Scripture they are ‘biblical’, but they are not ‘theological’, that is to say they are not rigorous in their reflection on the teaching of all scripture in the light of Christian history and our current

context. With this in mind, let us look at four of the accounts of corporate meetings that the evangelical church seems to be giving at the present time. These are that (a) corporate meetings are for evangelism; (b) corporate meetings are for teaching; (c) corporate meetings are for fellowship; (d) corporate meetings are for an encounter with God.

(a) Corporate Meetings are for Evangelism

One strong trend within the evangelical church is to view corporate meetings as being primarily for evangelism. However, as much as it is true that the desire to reach out to unbelievers is an essential part of the church, it must be asked whether there is any biblical support for this account of what we are doing when the church meets together.

It is, in fact, quite difficult to argue that the writers of the New Testament saw the presence of unbelievers as something that needs be encouraged in the corporate meetings of Christians. Perhaps the most obvious text which speaks of the presence of outsiders in Christian worship is 1 Corinthians 14. In this passage Paul is trying to show the Corinthians that the use of spiritual gifts in church should be for the edification of those present. Paul says that ‘tongues are a sign (Cor. 14:22-25), not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’

The key thing to note from these verses for our purposes is that Paul talks about the presence of unbelievers as a hypothetical possibility, not as something that was to be aimed at by the church. ‘Some unbelievers’ (v. 23) might come in and would think that the Corinthians were mad because they were speaking in tongues, then verse 24 mentions the possibility of an unbeliever coming in and hearing the intelligible words of prophecy and being aware of God’s presence with the congregation.

The inference is that the presence of outsiders was probably not the norm, and was certainly not the thing that the service was built around, though Paul was telling the people to take this possibility into account in the way their conducted their worship. Paul's evangelistic strategy was not to invite people to church. He went to them where they were comfortable, in their academic forums or in the streets, and he adopted their habits and talked in their language. He did not try to adapt Christian worship to be like these places.

It is, of course, true that church should not be so odd and jargonized that new people are incapable of understanding what is going on, and there are still many churches which have a great deal to learn in this respect. But, apart from not having biblical support, if this understanding of the purpose of corporate worship is overplayed it can have serious effects on the Christians who go to these services. This will take place either in elements of the service being twisted to the new purpose or else being sidelined or even eliminated. For example, if it is not removed altogether, congregational confession can sometimes be turned into a 'sinner's prayer', with believers being asked to say each week that they are under the wrath of God. This shows a profound failure to grasp the extent to which corporate worship and liturgy shapes Christian spirituality. When we add to this similar statements in the sermon and in the leading we can end up teaching believers to view themselves as still under the wrath of God which is to teach them to deny the gospel that there is no condemnation for those in Christ.

Another thing which can be distorted is the fullness of the gospel itself. What happens is that the riches of the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God on earth in the person of Christ is reduced to the message of salvation, often (though not always) presented in a rather minimalistic and clichéd way. While individual salvation is essential, the Bible speaks of many other things, and equally importantly it speaks of salvation in a great number of ways, and it is questionable whether its emphasis is as centred on the individual as some Westerners seem to think. This also has the side effect that other important biblical themes are excluded or reduced on the basis that we do not consider them the most helpful teaching for outsiders. However, this is to underestimate the power of all of God's truth, and also assumes that everyone in the service is likely to be attracted by the same sort of thing. Maybe this is part of the reason that so many churches lack 'tribal' variety: only those in the same social

‘tribe’ as the regular preachers will be reached because they are presenting what they think is the best way of articulating the gospel rather than teaching all of Christ from all of the Scriptures. ‘Ten thousand, thousand are their texts, but all their sermons one’.

As well as the misappropriation of some elements of worship other parts are omitted from the corporate meeting altogether. Giving is sometimes visually excluded from worship to make it more ‘outsider friendly’. The church still gives, but it is done in a way that is easy to miss, even for church members. However, the lack of a visible presence for the offering in the corporate life of the church is a problem. Despite evangelical claims to the contrary, corporate worship is ritual and the lack of visible giving removes from worship what the giving of money should also symbolize—especially in the materialistic west—the giving of all our lives (the last part of a person to be converted is their wallet).

Giving is normally only visually excluded, but the Lord’s Supper is often cut out entirely as it, too, is not seen as ‘seeker friendly’. It is sometimes argued that we need to use the time to present the gospel, but this ignores the teaching of 1 Corinthians 11:26, which describes the Lord’s Supper as the proclamation of the death of Christ. What is more, if the table is appropriately ‘fenced’ so that only believers in good standing are invited to participate, and unbelievers are warned not to do so, there is not only a proclamation of the gospel, but a warning that only those who have personal faith and are living with integrity should receive communion. The weekly ‘altar call’ is therefore for believers, not unbelievers.

Another element which can be diminished is singing and praise. This is problematic as it ignores the fact that we learn our theology through the words of the songs we sing. It also leaves this particular expression of church open to the charge of being deeply eccentric—spoken or sung praise has always been a significant part of Christian worship. Changing or excluding elements in the service on the basis of what a few people think is likely to attract non-believers is both arrogant and limiting. We do not always know what will catch the attention of the unbelievers in the congregation (and, in all but the smallest churches, there are always people present who do not believe), but it is more likely that they will not hear the gospel if it is always presented in the same formulaic way. To say that the meeting should be for evangelism is not the ‘clear teaching of Scripture’, it is a theological claim with little biblical warrant.

(b) Corporate Meetings are for Teaching

Another understanding which is highly prevalent is to see church meetings as primarily a time to teach people through a sermon or 'Bible talk'. This correctly understands the vital importance of biblical truth in the life of the church, but rather flattens the ways in which truth is communicated and retained. Biblical truth should shape and be presented in all parts of the service, not simply the sermon. Here are several ways in which an understanding of the service as primarily about the sermon can end up impoverishing the congregation's engagement with Scripture. Long, complex sermons which are aimed wholly at the understanding (which is often, though not always, what you find in churches with this sort of emphasis) will exclude many people in the congregation from being fed with scripture, or self select a congregation of people who like long, complex sermons. We are not to 'dumb down' the Bible, or the complexities that it contains, but neither are we to work entirely with the small percentage of the population with the education and temperament to enjoy this sort of intellectual workout. There are whole denominations which do this. In some church cultures the Bible is 'explained' rather than preached, the terminology implying that what is needed is intellectual understanding only. However, sermons are not primarily to inform the congregation about the contents of the Bible (though they will do this in passing), but to effect people's minds, imaginations and emotions so that they can engage their will to live for Christ.

This sort of emphasis can also push out the Lord's Supper, which detracts from the overall teaching of scripture in the service, especially if the preaching is not first rate: Paul describes the Lord's Supper as preaching the gospel. Those who exclude or diminish our reflection on the cross in this way do not do the church a service. In liturgical churches the omission or compression of the liturgy to give more time for the sermon can be unhelpful. We may be robbing ourselves of the opportunity to join with the church of the last 1500 years in its richly theological worship of Christ only in order to hear the preacher talk about 'postmodernism' or some other fad for the twentieth time. There are some preachers who teach the Bible with such wisdom and power that they make up for this; but there are not many of them. When the whole service is seen as the sermon the preacher is obliged to try and do everything in it. But there are too few preachers who can faithfully expound their text in a way which reaches all sorts of people at many different levels of spiritual growth and understanding. Often this sort of sermon becomes rambling, incoherent and tediously long.

The insight behind this—that the teaching of Scripture is of the highest importance in the worship of the people of God—is essential, but it may be better served when the service is not just preaching, nor even centred around preaching *in a way which denigrates the other ways of presenting the gospel*. This is especially the case when the preaching in question is a particular intellectual and western type of preaching which appeals to the middle classes almost exclusively. Every aspect of the service should teach scriptural truth, and we need to be realistic about how people retain truth. It is very rare that people can remember the points of a sermon a few days later, but if you ask them to sing favourite hymns they can do so with ease. The same is true of liturgy: I used to be able to recite the whole of the 1662 services of Morning and Evening Prayer and most of the Communion service along with the vicar—and much of it entirely from memory. These elements of the service are constantly repeated, with a repetition which, unlike the preacher’s fixations, often becomes a delight. The hymns are not a build up to the important bit; communion is not an annoying distraction which means the service lasts too long once a month. Repeated reflection on the truth of scripture, and especially the meaning of the death of Christ, is essential for growth and maturity, and for centuries Christians have accomplished this in part through hymns and the Eucharistic liturgy.

(c) Corporate Meetings are for Fellowship

More briefly, some churches apparently work on the basis that the main reason for corporate meetings are for fellowship. The Bible sees mutual encouragement as a very important reason for believers to meet together (Heb. 10:25), but it is reductionistic to see the purpose of worship as merely or mainly for fellowship. Practical outworkings of this sort of understanding can be that a rather unhealthy inward looking focus sometimes develops, where the importance of the mission of the church can start to disappear from view and the preacher doesn’t want to say anything too ‘challenging’. The comprehensibility and (dare I say it) relevance of the meetings begins to decline. The church can end up as not much more than a social centre.

(d) Corporate Meetings are For An Encounter With God

The final emphasis that I would like to mention is that corporate meetings are mainly about an encounter with God. While the first three descriptions are focused on the horizontal level of human to human contact (though

proponents would see God strongly involved), this last point is about the purely vertical human to God relationship. It seems fairly clear from the New Testament that God is in some way especially present when the church meets; if we are God's temple this is not surprising. In 1 Corinthians 5:4-5 Paul gives instructions for the excommunication of a man who is persisting in sin and he says 'When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord'. When the church is gathered together the power of the Lord Jesus is especially present by the Holy Spirit.

The felt presence of God in church meetings is wonderful, but it is not, in itself, the goal of the meeting. We will not normally have these mountain top experiences very often, and if we see them as the main point of our meetings then the danger is that everything else will be manipulated to produce them. It is wonderful when God interrupts our plans at church, but there is nothing worse than trying to manufacture these occasions. When we believe that a particular experience is the most important thing in our meetings the sermon time can be used to work up emotional states, rather than to instruct the mind and use the emotions to stir the will. But if the goal of the sermon is to create a particular emotional state, biblical content will often be reduced or practically abandoned. In a way similar to those who see the whole of the meeting as being about evangelism, one particular theme is repeated regardless of the text under discussion and other elements are downplayed or ignored.

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The desire for our meetings to be intelligible to outsiders, for us to preach scripture, have fellowship with each other and meet with God are clearly all good things that should be encouraged in our meetings together. However, these elements do not capture the point of our corporate meetings, especially our common worship on Sunday.

It is highly significant that when the earliest Christians, who were ethnically Jewish, changed the day on which they met they changed it to Sunday. They did not change it to Friday to celebrate the death of Christ, but to Sunday to celebrate His resurrection. It would hardly be possible to accuse the apostolic

communities of having a weak doctrine of the cross, and so we must take the fact that they moved worship from the Sabbath to the first day of the week, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead, as a genuine pointer to their understanding of its purpose. This ‘liturgical statement’ tells us as much about their theology as their explicit teaching in the New Testament. In Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; and John 20:1 it seems that the first day of the week came to be known as the ‘Lord’s Day’ (Rev. 1:10), and was the day on which the church gathered with the approval of the Apostles (Acts 20:7). Since this time the universal practice of the church (with the recent exception of a few small groups) has been Sunday worship.

My thesis is very simple and uncontroversial: when we meet together on Sundays as a church we are there to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. It would be exceptionally hard to deny that this was the understanding of the earliest Christians, but its implications do not always seem to have shaped the way that evangelicals worship. More specifically, I want to argue that this celebration of the resurrection of Jesus can be described as having an ‘evangelical’, an ‘ethical’ and an ‘eschatological’ component, all of which should be reflected in the way that we worship together.

(a) Common Worship as ‘Evangelical’

The resurrection was absolutely central in the evangelistic preaching of the early church; in Acts 17:18 we learn that when Paul preached the gospel to the Athenians they misunderstood him and thought he was preaching two gods called Jesus and the Resurrection. They did not think he was preaching Jesus and the Cross. Within much evangelicalism the essential point of the gospel is seen rather as being that ‘Jesus died for me’, which is possible if we have a very individually focused understanding of the reason that Jesus died. In this context the resurrection does little more than show that the sacrifice made on the cross was accepted. However, if we take a view which looks more at the sweep and understanding of the whole of Scripture it makes more sense to summarize the gospel as ‘Jesus the Messiah rose to bring about the life of the new creation’. I fear that, though they would never admit it, when Paul exhorts us (2 Tim. 2:8) to ‘remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel’ too many Christians think to themselves that it’s not their gospel. Of course the gospel includes the salvation of individuals, but God’s plan is far larger. Not for a minute does this deny the essential nature

of the cross, it is simply a call to reform our understanding of the gospel so that it better reflects the perspective of the New Testament and does not simply repeat the traditions of twentieth century evangelicalism.

Our worship is to be evangelical in the sense that it proclaims the gospel; all parts of worship are to be shaped by the gospel which reconciles people to God and keeps them reconciled and all parts are to express and teach the gospel. Our use of the sacraments which preach the gospel, our songs, intercessions and even the notices should be shaped by, and present, the gospel. The good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus is not merely the way of starting the Christian life which is then put aside and replaced with something else later on (whether Baptism in the Spirit or the academic study of Reformed Theology). The gospel has to be central all the way through the Christian life. The good news of the resurrection of the Son of God is something that happened in the past and to which we look back, but it shapes our lives now and promises us a future.

(b) Common Worship as ‘Ethical’

The New Testament has a number of ways in which it encourages believers to live holy lives. One of the most important of these (in Paul at least) is the resurrection. For example, at the end of 1 Corinthians 15, the most extensive teaching on the resurrection in the New Testament, Paul’s application is that the Corinthians should be steadfast, immovable, and committed to the Lord’s work—it is applied to how they should live.

In Colossians 3 Paul reminds the Colossians that they have been raised with Christ and should set their hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. He continues ‘Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things, for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.’ The resurrection is the motivation given for faithful Christian service and personal morality. Therefore, if our worship is to celebrate the resurrection it should be ‘ethical’, which is to say that all parts of worship should encourage and exhort people to live lives in the present which honour and serve God by loving him and their neighbour.

There are many ways in which our worship should be encouraging people to live lives that please God: in the communion the table should be ‘fenced’ which, apart from being a way of proclaiming the need for personal faith to unbelievers, is a way of exhorting professing Christians to live before God in holiness and in harmony with other Christians (1 Cor. 11:29). The singing of songs should also have effect of stirring the emotions to live holy lives: we cannot honestly sing of the love of God and our response to it if those things are not real in our lives. And naturally preaching should have an ethical element in its application of scriptural truth. The ethical part of Christian worship focuses on the present, but includes the past action of God who united us to the Son by the Spirit, who empowers us to live in the present by his Holy Spirit and by that same Spirit promises us the future holiness of the new creation.

(c) Common Worship as ‘Eschatological’

One of the most important—if not the most important—emphases of the New Testament is that in the resurrection of Christ the life of the new creation has begun. The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost marks the start of the Last Days as the resurrection life of the new creation breaks into the fallen creation by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and God’s people are incorporated into the risen Messiah by the Spirit of God.

When we meet to worship on Sunday we celebrate God’s work of creation and new creation, which means that our worship is profoundly ‘eschatological’, by which I mean focused on the future kingdom of God rather than obsessed with the timing of the rapture. Therefore our time together should point people towards the hope of the new creation as we on earth join with the worship of heaven by the power of the Holy Spirit. This should be reflected in many ways. The western Eucharistic liturgy is Pentecostal worship: we say ‘The Lord is here, His Spirit is with us’ and then a few seconds later more explicitly ‘so with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven’ we join in the worship of our redeemer God. Or as the recent song ‘The Glories of Calvary’ by Steve and Vicki Cook puts it ‘your saints below join with your saints above, rejoicing in the Risen Lamb’. By the Holy Spirit who brings the future age into the present we are joined with the new life of the resurrection.

In our common worship the people of God on earth join with the worship of heaven, looking forward to the day when God’s kingdom will come on earth

as it is in heaven. This encourages the people of God to live the resurrection life that the Holy Spirit has inaugurated in us, and should be reflected in every part of the service: in the choice of songs, in the focus of the preaching and in the way that we use the sacraments. The eschatological part of Christian worship focuses on the future, but is firmly rooted in the past events of the resurrection and Pentecost and has a strong effect on the present life of the community of the resurrection.

Conclusion

When we meet together on Sundays as a church the main purpose of our meeting is not evangelism, teaching, fellowship or a felt experience of God though these should be present to different degrees depending on the meeting. Rather, we are there as the community of the Holy Spirit to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. This celebration has evangelical, ethical and eschatological aspects which should mark all aspects of our corporate worship. In other words, as the people of God on earth join with the worship of heaven we are encouraged to live out the good news of the resurrection life that the Holy Spirit has begun in us.

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