

Rethinking Worship: Why Do We Do What We Do?

John 2:13-22 (NIV)

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ²⁰ They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Back in the days of Moses following the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, God laid out their worship in a very specific way, the start of which we heard in our first Bible reading today from Exodus 20. Yet there was still room to make a few things more convenient. Animal sacrifices were required according to God's law. Instead of bringing them along with their journey on foot, which could take days, caring for them along the way, cleaning up after them, they could just have the sacrifices available for purchase at the temple. For paying their temple tax, money would have to be exchanged for the accepted currency there in Jerusalem for the temple. You couldn't just use your local currency. So, it was easier to have the money changers right there. We don't know exactly when these practices were put into place, but by the first century AD, the temple courts were filled with animals, vendors, and money changers.

But what else did their conveniences also give them? A worship space with the bleating of animals, money changers calling out their services, overcharging for their services, barnyard smells. I don't know about you, but I have a really hard time blocking out other voices. You say something in the lobby while I am working in my office, and I will immediately shift focus to what you are saying even though I'm trying to do something else. By choices of convenience, the Jews had distracted themselves from the whole point of being there: to worship the Lord!

We have certain freedoms when it comes to how we worship God. If you were to design a worship service from scratch, what would it look like? What would it include? That's a big question. If this were Bible class, I would give you 5-10 minutes to start brainstorming this. This is no little ask. But I am assuming that maybe a couple of things come to your mind immediately.

Maybe you are thinking about the music, the hymns, and which ones you would pick or if you would get rid of all singing all together. Maybe you are thinking about what portions of the Bible you want to cover, how long the message should be, whether it should be 45 minutes or 5 minutes. Maybe you are thinking about how often we should celebrate the Lord's Supper, what kind of wine we should use, what kind of wafers, whether we have a communion rail or kneelers. Maybe you are thinking about what kind of seating we should have, chairs or pews or maybe have people stand the whole time, or get those nice cinema recliners with stadium seating for maximum comfort. Maybe you are thinking about what kind of prayers we should have, how long they should be, whether they should be done off the top of the head, ex corde, or always written out for everyone to follow. Maybe you are thinking of what the pastor should or shouldn't be wearing, what decorations we should or shouldn't have up. And the list goes on.

With the first few things that came to mind as you thought about designing a worship service from scratch, why were deciding on certain things over others? Was it based on tradition, that this is the way you've always done it? Was it based on personal preference, what you really want in a worship service? Was it based on convenience, what would make worship easier for you? Was it based on how this would affect others, what would help them and us to focus on God and what he has done for them?

If we are going to rethink our worship, we should probably start where God starts. Thinking back to the first Bible reading, we all recognized the Ten Commandments. Did you notice, though, the very first thing God has Moses record before the commandments are given? "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (Exodus 20:2) God starts with what he has already done for us. He already rescued the Israelites from slavery. Why? Because he loved them. Because he keeps his promises. After that is established, he gives his commands.

God gives the commands of how to worship him not because he needs to feel important and have his ego stroked by people praising him. He doesn't give the commands because he needs our obedience or our sacrifices for him to love us or bless us or accept us, for us to get the best that he has to offer. He gives us commands to keep us from becoming slaves to our sins, to living selfishly, to living driven by our personal convenience and preferences which can distract others from seeing what God has done for them.

The convenience driven choices of the Jews in the first century AD had created a distracting worship where people could not hear what God had done for them. So Jesus cleared out the temple courts of all the animals and vendors. He wasn't doing this for himself, because he couldn't focus or because he was having a bit of a temple tantrum and wanted his way, but because he saw how this was hurting people, distracting them from what God was doing for them, that people were more consumed about making it easier to meet obligations than it was to receive the rest and identity that God offers us in worship.

As the Jews were a bit shocked and maybe a bit skeptical of Jesus clearing the temple, they asked "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" (verse 18) Jesus did what he had done in giving the Ten Commandments. He focused them first on what he as God was doing for them. Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." (verse 19) Although the Jews thought that he was talking about the literal temple building, John gives us the insight: "But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken." (verses 21-22) Jesus cleared the temple so that they could see that the Messiah was here, the one who came to suffer and die to take away their sins. He cleared the temple so that they could see how they were saved.

Jesus clearing the temple so that people can see what God has done and is doing for them gets us rethinking our worship. Instead of being driven by conveniences and preferences, we want to remove distractions and help people focus on God and what he does for them. What can we do in our worship to help people see Jesus, who spent his whole life living for us, that everything that he did he did selflessly for you and for me so that we would know that we are loved and cherished and forgiven and whole and perfect?

Honestly, this is why we have the structure to our worship that we do. We typically begin our worship in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Why? To remind you that God has come to us to adopt us, to remind you of your baptism, that there he washed you clean, purged away all your sins, gave you his name, and covered you with God the Son's perfection so that you are right with him and are an heir of heaven. This is why we come to worship, why we are worthy to be here.

Maybe you doubt your worthiness to be here, to be with God. That's why we then typically give you words to confess your sins, to lay them out in the open before God and before the people here, making us all vulnerable, only to then immediately hear that God has paid for those sins too and removed them from your record. This makes us want to praise him, and we provide that outlet of praise with our hymns. We even went surveyed you about your favorite hymns because we don't want the difficulty of the music to dissuade you from opening your lips and expressing why you are so thankful for the God who has done all these things for you.

Then we read from God's Word, the Bible. Why? Because faith in God comes through hearing the message, the message about Christ. Because everything that was written in the past in God's Word was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide, we would have hope every single day to get us through life in this sin filled world. Children need this Word of God just as much as adults. That's why we have children's messages in addition to the sermon. Plus, you all know that you get a lot out of the kids' messages and you love seeing kids learn about the love of God as you have.

We write out and use prayers that focus us on what we heard from God's Word. We use the three historical and universal creeds, Christian statements of faith, to remind ourselves that we do not come for a convenience-based faith product. We are here as part of a whole body of Christ, one that stretches across the world and all the way back to Adam & Eve, united by what God says, not what we want or prefer.

We offer the Lord's Supper pretty much every week. Why? Because here is a very tangible way, a way to literally touch, see, taste, and smell that Jesus has given up his body and blood for you for the forgiveness of your sins. It unites you with him, unites you with your brothers and sisters in Christ who have publicly confessed the same thing and stand shoulder to shoulder with you in that confession, reminding you that you are not alone, but you are part of something bigger than yourself.

Then you get into the aesthetics of worship. Why chairs, not pews? Why not cinema recliners? Regardless of what you think about their comfort level, they allow us flexibility to accommodate people with wheelchairs and walkers as well as help the flow of our worship. I wear a robe so that you can tell pretty easily who is leading me and directing me for this worship, and also so that you aren't wondering where I got all my Kohl's cash to afford that suit and tie. We put up banners on the walls with specific symbolism about God and what he does for us. We use colors that do the same, having specific reason for when they are used, such as purple here to remind us to turn away from our sin as we get to bask in the richness of Christ's life lived for us and sacrificed for us.

There's so much more that goes into why we do what we do for worship. It's good to step back and rethink our worship, ask what things distract from knowing God and what he has done for us. It's even better to make sure that every element of our worship is purposefully designed to focus people on God and what he has done for us, how he lived perfectly for us, how he gave his life into death, how he was raised in three days to know that we are forgiven, that we are loved, that we are perfect before God right now, cleared of all the things in this world that want to distract us from what God has done and is doing for us. This is why we do what we do here. Amen.