



PERSPECTIVE

FEBRUARY 2023

More Than Music

The Congregation's Role in
Corporate Worship

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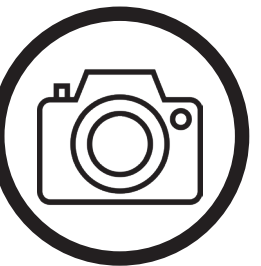
Recommended by Andrew Dallas



BIBLE READING PLAN 7

Take Up & Read

February



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*Parker & Madeline Bentley, Richard &
Leslie D'Cruz, James & Madison Gibson,
Morgan & Kahra Nix, David Rhoden, Caleb
Rogers, Kathryn Smith*

More Than Music:

The Congregation's Role in Corporate Worship

¹⁴ *I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that,* ¹⁵ *if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.*

1 Timothy 3:14–15

Suppose you have a conversation with Andrew, your Christian coworker, on Monday morning. The topic of churches comes up, and you inquire, “Andrew, what do you like about your church?” He replies, “Well, my church has a wonderful children’s program. The messages are always encouraging. And I love the worship.” You then ask, “what *exactly* about the worship do you enjoy?” He answers, “My goodness, we have an amazing worship band. They’re so talented and can play any style. They’re able to play a mix of hymns and contemporary songs, which allows our church to put on traditional and contemporary services. Members can choose either service based on their preferences. For me, I prefer the contemporary service. The songs are appealing and help get me into a worshipful mood. Our worship leader went to Juilliard and toured with the band Third Day!”

There are many things worth highlighting about Andrew’s answer to a question about worship. For starters, he’s extremely impressed with the skill of his church’s worship band. He’s also pleased that people can choose which gathering to attend based on their musical preferences. Moreover, he seems to rely on music to put him in a “worshipful mood” (whatever that means). Each of these observations would be worth its own *Perspective* article. Yet I wish to highlight one aspect of his answer: Andrew *only* speaks of music when prompted by a question about worship.

Is Andrew odd for this? Christian, what do you think of when you hear the word “worship”?

In particular, what immediately comes to mind when you consider your church’s corporate worship? I would guess that most evangelicals merely think of music. Consider churches you may have visited before. The “worship band” gets up to lead an opening song. Some person then walks on stage, gives some announcements, and then says something like, “before we move *back into a time of worship*, I’m going to lead us in prayer.” He prays, and the band leads the “time of worship.” Fifteen

minutes later, a pastor delivers a thirty-minute message, followed by (you guessed it) more worship.

Why are so many of us inclined to reduce corporate worship solely to the musical portions of our services?

There are many reasons for this confusion. Perhaps the main reason is this: *many of us equate worship with music because we have been trained—deliberately or subtly—that singing is the only way congregations participate in worship.* However, on this point, Scripture is clear: **corporate worship encompasses much more than music.** Every element of Christian worship involves the active participation of the entire congregation. This article will endeavor to show how God’s assembled people all have a role in everything that happens in the Sunday morning gathering.

THE ROLE OF EVERY MEMBER IN EVERY ELEMENT OF WORSHIP

Appreciating “what a church is” dramatically helps us understand corporate worship. The apostle Peter says of the church in 1 Peter 2:5: “*you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*” According to Peter, Christians are stones. Together, they form a spiritual house which we call a local church. Every time a church gathers in the name of Jesus, the people create a habitation of praise—an environment of exultation that exists solely to glorify God. For this reason, Peter continues in verse 9, “*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*”

Such a vision for the church shatters any notion of performance in corporate worship. If every member is essential to what a church *actually is*, and if corporate worship is essential to church life, then every member is essential to corporate worship. Congregations are not audiences in worship. They are eager and active participants.

Let’s examine the congregation’s role in different elements of our corporate worship.

THE CONGREGATION’S ROLE IN SINGING

Most of us intuitively recognize singing as a participatory part of worship. However, many Christians sadly refrain from entering into congregational singing. Perhaps they don’t like the songs or think they’re bad singers. If that’s you, Christian, be encouraged; God wants you to sing!

Did you know there are four-hundred-plus references to singing in Scripture? You will find fifty direct commands to sing. The longest book in the Bible is the Psalms, which is essentially a songbook. Moreover, the most quoted book in the New Testament is the Psalms. It is paramount to God that his people—every last one of them sing his praises.

The apostle Paul makes no exceptions when he says in Colossians 3, *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”* Singing is non-optional in Christian life and corporate worship. Moreover, the human voice is the only instrument referred to in New Testament worship. God’s design is that an untrained choir of blood-bought saints, also known as “the congregation,” comprise the local church’s music ministry.

Again, maybe you don’t like the sound of your own voice. Perhaps you fear your singing will draw attention to yourself or even discourage others who can sing better than you. Lay those concerns to rest and trust God’s holy Word—he wants you to sing.

THE CONGREGATION’S ROLE IN PRAYER

A cursory reading of the New Testament reveals the priority of prayer in gathered worship (Acts 4:23–31, 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Timothy 2). We see churches pray together in one voice, and we also see individuals lead congregations in prayer. And we should do all of this so as to edify or build up the whole body (1 Corinthians 14). It’s worth acknowledging what happens when someone in our church stands before us to pray. Prayers of Confession, Pastoral Prayers, and Prayers of Thanksgiving are not spiritual performances. They are *congregational* cries to God. Christians don’t listen to prayers—they are led in prayer. When an individual leads a prayer in corporate worship, they speak as a mouthpiece for the congregation. Hence, their words demand the attention and affirmation of every saint.

It’s easy to tune out when someone else is praying. We all do it sometimes. Consider verbally following the prayer by saying “Amen” when you agree with something that’s been said. But whether you say “Amen” with your lips, we all ought to be saying it with our hearts because prayer is a congregational exercise.

THE CONGREGATION’S ROLE IN SCRIPTURE READINGS

Paul charged Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture, which was no empty exercise. Paul knew active listening to be one of the chief means

of implanting truth into the hearts of congregations. In an age of high literacy, we moderns can forget that those early believers studied the Bible chiefly by meditating on what they had memorized in the context of corporate gatherings. Indeed, true Christians stand in awe of God’s Word. Today, we should attend to Scripture readings with the same posture of David, who says in Psalm 19, *“More to be desired are they [the Scriptures] than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.”*

Therefore, let’s pay attention when someone is reading the Bible aloud. You can engage by thinking—right there and then—about what encourages you in that passage or what questions you may have about the passage. Be an engaged listener of the reading of the Word of God.

THE CONGREGATION’S ROLE IN PREACHING (YES, PREACHING!)

At least the congregation has a passive role in preaching, right? Wrong. Preaching is an active element of *congregational* worship. John Piper is right to define preaching as *“expository exultation.”* After all, Peter exhorts preachers to *“speak as the oracles of God,”* which means that when people hear faithful preaching, they engage with God. The preacher’s task is facilitating fellowship between the congregation and the Lord. Faithful preaching upholds Christ so that the hearers meaningfully commune with the Almighty. Preachers are simply instruments through which believers behold their God.

In Nehemiah 8, God’s people—after years of rebellion and neglect of Scripture—recommitted themselves to God’s Word. After Ezra and others expounded the Scriptures, Nehemiah 8:6 reads, *“And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.”* Notice how the people actively interacted with the Lord in the context of biblical exposition. And this was described as worship. How could it not? The people were engaging with God. Commenting on this text, Charles Simeon (1759–1836) asserted:

This was a deportment which became sinners in the presence of their God: they did not look to the creature, but to God, whose voice they heard, and whose authority they acknowledged, in every word that was spoken. What a contrast does this form with the manner in which the word of God is heard amongst us! How rarely do we find persons duly impressed with a sense of their obligation to God

*for giving them a revelation of his will! **How rarely do men at this day look through the preacher unto God, and hear God speaking to them by the voice of his servants!***ⁱⁱ

Consider the phrase, “look through the preacher unto God.” Think of that the next time your pastor preaches! So much as the sermon is faithful to the Scriptures, you are communing with the living God.

THE CONGREGATION'S ROLE IN BAPTISM AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

The congregation's role in the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) is tremendous, though perhaps it's not as apparent with baptism. In an age of expressive individualism, Christians can tend to think baptism is merely about a new believer's profession of faith: someone's personal decision to express their allegiance to Christ. And they're not wrong about this vertical element of baptism. But it's only part of the story. There is a corporate dimension to baptism that we are far too quick to dismiss. In baptism, the believer declares his union with Christ and, thereby, his union with Christ's church.

Therefore, baptism is best understood as an initiatory rite, an avenue of entrance into formal membership of a local church. The New Testament has no category for a Christian who's not a part of a local body of believers. When a congregation witnesses a baptism, they formally welcome that new Christian into their family. It should be a sweet occasion in which the whole church celebrates the goodness of God.

In the Lord's Supper, Christians spiritually feast on the Lord Jesus Christ. This ordinance intends to fuel the faith of saints. It's important to appreciate that we don't get a different or better Christ in communion, but we may get the same Christ better. The personhood of Christ and the benefits of his sacrifice are made more vivid in the Lord's Supper. On this point, the Scottish Presbyterian Robert Bruce (1554–1631)—who refers to the ordinance of the Lord's Supper as a sacrament, as many Protestants have and do—is especially helpful:

Therefore I say, we get no other thing in the Sacrament than we get in the Word. Content yourself with this. But if this is so, the Sacrament is not superfluous.

Would you understand then, what new thing you get, what other things you get? I will tell you. Even if you get the same thing which you get in the Word, yet you get that same thing better. What is this

*“better”? You get a better grip of the same thing in the Sacrament than you got by the hearing of the Word. That same thing which you possess by the hearing of the Word, you now possess more fully. God has more room in your soul, through your receiving of the Sacrament, than he could otherwise have by your hearing of the Word only. What then, you ask, is the new thing we get? We get Christ better than we did before. We get the thing which we had more fully, that is, with a surer apprehension than we had before. We get a better grip of Christ now, for by the Sacrament my faith is nourished, the bounds of my soul are enlarged, and so where I had but a little grip of Christ before, as it were, between my finger and my thumb, now I get him in my whole hand, and indeed the more my faith grows, the better grip I get of Christ Jesus. Thus the Sacrament is very necessary, if only for the reason that we get Christ better, and get a firmer grasp of him by the Sacrament than we could have before.”*ⁱⁱⁱ

God intends to provide his embodied people with physical signs of spiritual realities in the sacraments. Special grace is not mechanically infused into Christians when they take the Lord's Supper (this is what Roman Catholics mean when they call the Lord's Supper a sacrament, but it is clearly not what Bruce taught). Yet, those who partake in faith nonetheless experience their faith strengthened at that table.

Each Christian communes with Christ at the table of the Lord's Supper. But we must never forget that the Lord's Supper is a family meal. In it, we acknowledge our bonds and fellowship with one another. The “He” and “me” of communion becomes the “we.” What *He* has done for *me* on the cross has purchased the fellowship that we share.

The next time we celebrate baptism and the Lord's Supper, remember that you are needed. A congregation must gather for these ordinances to be observed.

APPLICATION

In this article, I have endeavored to show how the congregation has a role in every element of our Sunday morning gatherings. Congregations are not audiences—they actively participate in each aspect of worship. In light of all of this, consider three practical applications.

THINK ABOUT CORPORATE WORSHIP BEFORE YOU WORSHIP CORPORATELY.

I have long made it my practice to read bulletins before church services. I encourage you to do the same! Arrive early on Sundays. Take a moment in the pew to look over

the service order in the minutes before our gatherings. And then think, “how will I engage with *all* of worship this morning? What’s my role in the songs? What’s my role in the prayer of confession? What’s my role in the Scripture reading? What’s my role in the sermon?” Don’t let the elements of the service wash over you without pondering their significance. In each part of our gatherings, consider your role to God and to your brothers and sisters in Christ.

LOOK AT OTHERS IN CORPORATE WORSHIP.

I occasionally have the privilege of leading the singing at Mount Vernon. One of the sweetest parts of this is facing hundreds of saints as they enter into worship. Unfortunately, the average church member misses out on this because the way our Main Hall is designed emphasizes what’s happening up front. Nevertheless, I encourage members to look around at each other at different points in our service. Remember, one of the ways we let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly is by encouraging *one another* with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. When I worship God in song, I’m not only addressing God but also reminding the saint next to me of God’s goodness and the beauty of his promises.

PLEAD WITH GOD’S BLESSING UPON OUR GATHERINGS.

As long as you’re a member of Mount Vernon, the most critical thing in your life is what happens between 10:30 am and 12:15 pm on Sundays. Corporate worship is the rushing river that runs through every current of your life. Thus, make it your priority to plead with God that he would greatly bless our gatherings. He’s already made special promises to his gathered people: the risen Christ is in our midst! So let us, with our whole hearts, anticipate and seek God’s rich supply of grace in corporate worship.

— Zack DiPrima

ⁱ John Piper, *Expository Exultation: Christian Preaching as Worship* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

ⁱⁱ Charles Simeon, *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 4:292.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper*. Quoted in Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), pp. 223-224.

Sing!

How Worship Transforms Your Life, Family, and Church

Written by Keith & Kristyn Getty

Starting with the success of their song “In Christ Alone,” Keith and Kristyn Getty have been significant contributors to modern hymn writing. In two-plus decades, they’ve written many doctrinally rich, God-centric songs that we sing at Mount Vernon, along with millions worldwide.

Out of their experiences as worship leaders, successful songwriters, and faithful Christians, the Gettys wrote the book *Sing!: How Worship Transforms Your Life, Family, and Church* to help believers sing better in accordance with God’s Word. In it, they explain why and how believers should worship through singing.

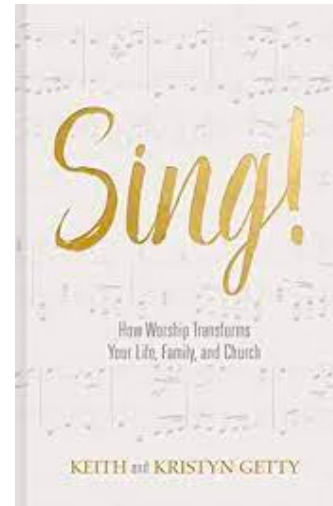
In the first half of *Sing!*, the Gettys provide three reasons why believers should sing: we are created, commanded, and compelled to sing as a vital part of our worship life. They argue that since God gave humans the capacity to sing, the believer should recognize and cultivate his God-given ability, not for his satisfaction but for God’s glory. The book helpfully points us to examples of singing in the Bible. Jesus sings with his disciples in the upper room (Matt. 26:30), and Paul quotes hymns (Col. 1:15-17). The book of Psalms is Israel’s songbook. The Gettys point out that Scripture also mandates and provides clear direction for worship through singing (Eph. 5:19). They tell us that in obedience to God and awe of his greatness, the believer can’t help but “sing the glory of his name” (Ps. 66:1-2).

In the second half of *Sing!*, the Gettys describe how singing changes the believer, edifies the church, and impacts the world. Referencing Colossians 3:16, the Gettys explain that sincere singing at home and in church, a crucial part of spiritual formation, causes the heart to engage with the truths of Scripture and serves and edifies our spiritual family. We learn that as we embrace and proclaim the truths of God’s Word through enthusiastic, thoughtful, and selfless singing in every season and circumstance, we commend the gospel to a watching world.

Sing! closes with the Gettys giving good instruction to pastors, song leaders, musicians, and creatives to help those they lead to sing well.

Sing! is a helpful handbook for Christian singing. I wouldn’t hesitate to recommend it to those who want to grow personally or help others grow in their desire and confidence to sing songs of the Lord in their home and church.

– Recommended by Kaki Davis



Excerpts from the Book

1

“Don’t sing primarily because you love singing, or keep quiet because you don’t. Sing because you love who made you, and formed you, and enables you to sing.”

– *Created to ...Sing!*, p. 10

2

“Singing gives voice to a heart that deeply knows the gospel of grace. It is the overflow of a heart captivated by the gospel”

– *Compelled to ...Sing!*, p. 31

3

“The church that sings together—across generations, standing side by side, putting community unity before personal preferences—is making a powerful and attractive statement to those who yearn for community more authentic than can be enjoyed online and friendship deeper than is found in counting your Facebook friends.”

– *Sing! ...with the Local Church*, p. 79

Going Public

Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership

Written by Bobby Jamieson

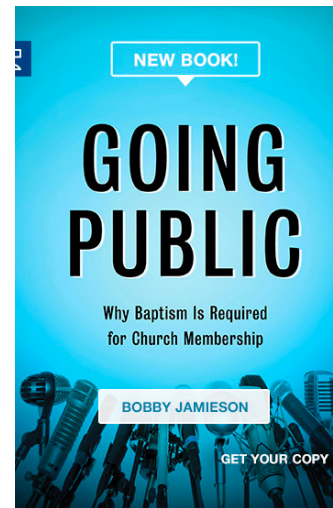
Should a church admit someone into membership and participation in the Lord's Supper who hasn't been baptized as a Christian? That's the central question that Bobby Jamieson seeks to answer in *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership*. Jamieson's goal in writing is to "argue that [the relationship between the ordinances and membership] has a discernible theological shape, and this shape makes baptism a requirement for church membership" (18).

Jamieson divides the book into three sections. The first introduces relevant questions and terminology historically used in these discussions. Most notably, Jamieson explains the difference between "open" vs "closed" membership. Open membership does not require baptism for membership, and closed membership does. He devotes the second section, and the bulk of the book, to providing a theological framework for understanding the relationship between the ordinances and membership, guiding the reader through the Scriptures to ultimately see membership as "the relation the ordinances imply and normally create" (146). Finally, the last section uses the theological framework to engage directly with objections to closed membership and to show the inconsistencies and dangers of open membership.

I am thankful Jamieson dialogues fairly but firmly with those who disagree, clearly representing positions on open membership and citing them directly while demonstrating how they don't hold water when tested with Scripture. I appreciated how Jamieson carefully, thoughtfully, and biblically engaged with this challenging issue. I walked away from this book with more profound gratitude for God's gift of baptism and the Lord's Supper to the church as a means of depicting spiritual realities before God and one another. I also found myself challenged to consider the implications of the ordinances on my relationships in the body. I am more eager to celebrate these ordinances with the church as we see new members baptized and partake of the bread and cup together as one body.

I would recommend this book to three kinds of people: (1) You've had questions about the relationship between the ordinances and church membership. (2) You want to have a better understanding and appreciation for how the ordinances function in the life of Mount Vernon. (3) You want to have a better theological foundation for the ordinances to be equipped to counsel others in this topic. If one of those shoes fits, this book is for you!

– Recommended by Andrew Dallas



Excerpts from the Book

1

"Baptism proclaims that in Christ we have already passed through judgment and emerged safely on the other side."

– *The Initiating Oath Sign of the New Covenant*, p. 74

2

"A church and church membership aren't constituted by a covenant as opposed to the two ordinances, or vice versa, but *by the two ordinances which ratify a covenant*."

– *Badges of Belonging: Church Membership and Its Effective Signs*, p. 150

3

"Baptism can't be opposed to a credible profession of faith; it is faith's profession."

– *Answering Objections*, p. 178

FEBRUARY

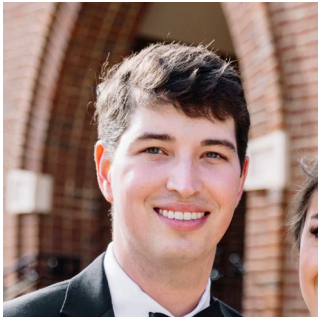
These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

February 1	Romans 5:6–11	February 17	Hebrews 10:19–39
February 2	Romans 5:12–17	February 18	Isaiah 44:9–20
February 3	Job 34:1–21	February 19	Habakkuk 2
February 4	Romans 5:18–21	February 20	Romans 2:12–29
February 5	Romans 2:1–11	February 21	Romans 6:1–4
February 6	1 Peter 1:1–9	February 22	Romans 6:5–11
February 7	1 Peter 1:10–12	February 23	Romans 6:12–14
February 8	1 Peter 1:13–25	February 24	Deut. 5:1–22
February 9	1 Peter 2:1–12	February 25	Romans 6:15–23
February 10	Psalms 66	February 26	Romans 2:12–29
February 11	1 Peter 2:13–25	February 27	Romans 3:1–8
February 12	1 Peter 1:1–9	February 28	Romans 7:1–6
February 13	Habakkuk 2		
February 14	Romans 1:16–17		
February 15	Galatians 3:10–14		
February 16	Isaiah 8		

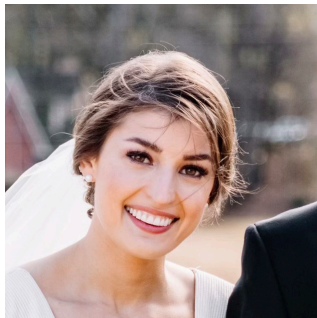
*Sermons in bold

TAKE UP & READ

NEW MEMBERS



**Parker
Bentley**



**Madeline
Bentley**



**Richard
D'Cruz**



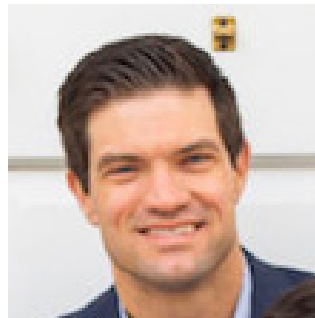
**Leslie
D'Cruz**



**James
Gibson**



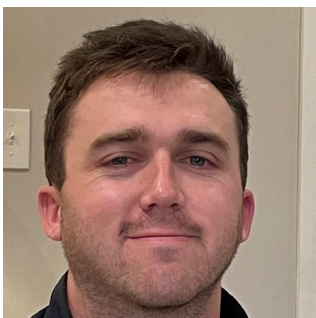
**Madison
Gibson**



**Morgan
Nix**



**Kahra
Nix**



David Rhoden



Caleb Rogers



Kathryn Smith



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH