



PERSPECTIVE

JANUARY 2023

CORPORATE

Worship

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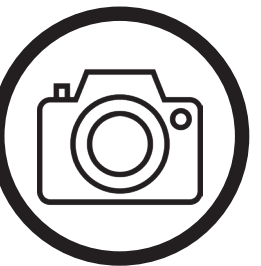
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Corporate Worship

What are Christians looking for in a church? Many good answers come to mind, ranging from sound doctrine, lively preaching, a sense of community to evangelistic outreach, a heart for the poor, and the ability to get to know the pastors. Christians also care about corporate worship—all that takes place during a local church's main weekly gathering. Indeed, Christians care *deeply* about corporate worship.

At Mount Vernon, our main service lasts, on average, about 90 minutes. So, if you attend the Sunday morning service 45 times a year and come to Mount Vernon for ten years, you'd participate in 675 hours of corporate worship. You'd hear 675 sermons, sing over 4,000 songs, join in over 2,500 prayers, and recite creeds and confessions over a hundred times.

Why refer to this time as “corporate” worship? Because worship is more than what happens when we gather. It's more than the songs we sing. Worship is a posture of humility, submission, and reverence toward God that should mark all of life. In 2008, Brian Doerksen wrote the song “Come, Now Is the Time to Worship.” I know what he means. He's encouraging believers to approach the Lord, make much of him during that gathering, and sing his praises. Indeed, that *is* worship. But it is not *exclusively* worship. We can worship God in everything we do. We can worship the Lord as we clean out the garage, type up a report, change a diaper, and spend time with the Lord in private prayer. Worship ought to mark all of life.

JESUS WITH US WHEN WE GATHER

To be sure, something special happens when God's people gather as a local church. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” He couldn't be referring to the haphazard gathering of believers at Starbucks because the passage's context proves he's talking about the congregation meeting with the God-given responsibility to practice church discipline. This gathered people is a church with authority to baptize and give the Lord's Supper. That congregation is called a “church,” and when the people of the church meet, Jesus is with them.

What is unique about the gathering of a local church? Notice what takes place:

- ✦ We pray *together*.
- ✦ We sing *together*.

- ✦ We celebrate baptism and the Lord's Supper *together*.
- ✦ We hear the Word read *together*.
- ✦ We hear the Word preached *together*.
- ✦ We confess our sins *together*.

You can't miss it: we do all of this together! We aren't separated by screens; we aren't marching to the beat of our own drum. Instead, we are all together in one room, making much of God. The church is a living, breathing act of protest in a world of workers increasingly isolated from one another—working quietly from home with only a computer screen to unite them. But the church says, “No, we will gather!”

*God did not design us to live life alone,
we are to be a community,
a family of faith,
a people set apart
and brought together
by the Word and Spirit.*

Corporate worship represents less than one percent of your week, but those minutes may be the most critical time you spend. (I know, precisely what you'd expect a pastor to say). But consider all the good that Scripture promises will come from our corporate worship:

- ✦ Filled with the Spirit of God, we make “*melody to the Lord*” with our hearts and submit “*to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (Eph. 5:19–21). So today, when everyone is trying to get ahead, Christians come together and say, “No, please, *you go first*.”
- ✦ Filled with the “word of Christ,” we sing “*psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs*,” and in so doing, we teach and admonish one another “in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16–17).
- ✦ Meeting together as Scripture commands, we don't just fill our heads with more data. Instead, we encourage “*one another, and all the more as [we] see the Day drawing near*” (Heb. 10:25).
- ✦ Celebrating the Lord's Supper by eating the bread and drinking the cup, we demonstrate to the world that we are one in Christ (1 Cor. 11:17–34). Even the act of baptism, which is to take place among God's people, is a commitment not only of the individual to “*walk in newness of life*” (Rom. 6:4) but of the congregation to help them walk faithfully in the months and years ahead.

- ★ Under the oversight of shepherds, when we gather, congregations are equipped through the preached Word to do “*the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*” (Eph. 4:12). Every Sunday, we meet to part for another week, emboldened to more faithfully live out the Christian faith.

What *exactly* does it mean that Jesus is with us when we gather? I’m not quite sure, but I know he *is* at work in our singing and praying and preaching and baptizing and feasting—the Lord is at work uniting us to himself and preserving the body of Christ in a fallen world. That’s a big deal!

A YEAR ABOUT CORPORATE WORSHIP

In 2010, when MVBC first elected elders, we went away for a short retreat. We discussed what we wanted to see over the next five years. We landed on five culture shifts we planned to teach and pray about: a culture of evangelism, a culture of disciple-making, a culture of generosity, a culture of family ministry, and a culture of serving other churches. We devoted a whole year deep diving into each of these topics.

Last year, we decided to keep up this habit of diving deep into the waters of a particular topic. In 2022, we focused on prayer. But, for 2023, the elders have decided to spend some extra attention on the subject of, you guessed it, corporate worship.

Why *this* topic? Many reasons!

FIRST, WE DO NOT WANT TO TAKE CORPORATE WORSHIP FOR GRANTED. You may have grown up in the church and never thought to question *why* we gather each Sunday or *what* we are supposed to do when we assemble. Over time, it’s possible to grow cold to the routine. By taking a closer look at what we do and why we do it, your heart for corporate worship might grow warmer.

SECOND, WE AIM TO BE GUIDED BY SCRIPTURE.

When it comes to what happens on Sunday morning, it’s possible to lick your finger, stick it in the air, and figure out where the cultural winds are blowing. Instead of letting Scripture direct our corporate worship, we face the temptation to let people’s personal preferences guide us. Problems exist from the other side as well. It’s possible for a church’s liturgy (that’s the order of service—every church has a liturgy) to be based more on tradition (what we’ve always done) than Scripture (what God would have us do). Spending a year thinking about corporate worship is akin to spending a year asking the question, “How would God have us honor him when we gather?”

THIRD, WE STRIVE FOR UNITY.

One of the godliest men I knew in seminary was a professor by the name of Chip Stam. He taught in the school of music until he died of cancer in 2011. Chip commented on Christian attitudes toward the corporate worship service that I’ll never forget: “*the mature are easily edified.*” In other words, mature Christians are thankful to come together to sing God’s praises and hear God’s Word. They don’t need the best music or the style that they most prefer to get something out of corporate worship. They will walk away encouraged if they know their worship has exalted God.

At Mount Vernon, everyone gives a little—you’ll find ancient hymns and new choruses. Sometimes you’ll hear the organ and recite a creed. You’ll see some people with hands raised and others with both fists clinging to their bulletin. The point is that we remain together. We don’t divide by style of music, amount of instrumentation, or attire. The goal is unity. We think our unity will grow even deeper and richer as we come to understand why we do what we do.

FOURTH, WE HAVE ROOM TO GROW.

Christians of the past had a Latin phrase they loved to use: *ecclesia semper reformanda est*, which means the church is always to be reformed. In other words, we must constantly look at Scripture and ask ourselves how to align our practice more tightly with the Word of God. So, 2023 is a year to look at our gatherings and communicate *why* we do what we do and *how* we might do what we do even better. Maybe this will lead to tweaks here and there—please, no changes on a large scale! Still, we want to look at everything we do with humility and discern where we might grow.

These are just four reasons to spend a year thinking, praying, and teaching about corporate worship. I’m excited to roll up my sleeves and dig into this topic. I’m eager for you to join me on the journey.

THE UNIMPRESSED MARK TWAIN

One of America’s greatest writers, Mark Twain, loved to mock Christianity. He wrote a satirical essay in 1903 called *Was the World Made for Man?* making fun of the idea that humanity is the crowning achievement—the pinnacle—of God’s creation. He denied intelligent design altogether. Twenty years before writing that piece, Twain visited London and took the opportunity to visit one of the world’s most famous churches, the Metropolitan Tabernacle, pastored by the Prince of Preachers, Charles Spurgeon.

Neither Spurgeon nor the corporate worship impressed the great author. Geoff Chang, in his book *Spurgeon the Pastor*, includes an excerpt from Mr. Twain's diary:

Sunday, August 17, '79. Raw and cold, and a drenching rain. Went to hear Mr. Spurgeon. House three-quarters full—say three thousand people. First hour, lacking one minute, taken up with two prayers, two ugly hymns, and Scripture-reading. Sermon three-quarters of an hour long. A fluent talker, good, sonorous voice. Topic treated in an unpleasant, old fashion: Man a mighty bad child, God working at him in forty ways and having a world of trouble with him.

A wooden faced congregation; just the sort to see no incongruity in the majesty of Heaven stooping to plead and sentimentalize over such, and see in their salvation an important matter.

We're accustomed to reading how people loved Spurgeon's preaching and the congregational singing of the Tabernacle. Twain walked away from the service unmoved, unaffected. The Apostle Paul described believers as "a fragrance of death to death" in the nostrils of unbelievers. However, one could say the same about the gathering of believers. Corporate worship will not impress the man or woman without the Spirit of God. "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (2 Cor. 2:15–16).

An unbeliever, Mark Twain could leave Spurgeon's sermon impressed with his speech: "a fluent talker, good, sonorous voice"—but everything else about corporate worship—the praying, the singing, and above all, the theological content—left Twain with a bitter taste in his mouth, like a child who just swallowed bitter medicine.

Why do I share this account of Twain's visit to Spurgeon's church? Because it shows that even the best corporate worship will leave unbelievers unimpressed. They don't love the things of God, aren't eager to hear about their sin, and don't want to sing about the bloody cross. Unbelievers *will* love a good show, catchy music, and a feel-good message. But give them the true gospel, and it doesn't matter how well put together the service is. They will leave with the same bitter taste in their mouths until the Lord changes their hearts.

CARE ABOUT CORPORATE WORSHIP

As Christians, we're to care about many, many things. We should long for the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ

to reach the ends of the earth. We are to eagerly desire our poor neighbors to be warm and well-fed—and to see Christians serving them so that they might better understand the service of Christ at Calvary! We are to enjoy Christian hospitality as we open our homes and lives to one another.

However, we are *also* to care about our corporate worship. Jesus is with us when we gather. So, in corporate worship, we have a taste of what Adam and Eve experienced before sin entered the Garden when they could actually "hear the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden" (Gen. 2:8). They knew something of the presence of God.

Ever since the Fall, God's people have been seeking after God. We read in Genesis 4 of people gathering to make much of God: "At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD" (Gen. 4:26). When Israel became a nation, they regularly assembled to humble themselves before their Maker and Redeemer: "Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!" (Psa. 89:5).

In short, God's people have always come together. No wonder the priority of believers filled with the Spirit at Pentecost was to gather and learn and call out to God: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). In these gatherings, however imperfect, we are knocking on the door of heaven itself. As the author of Hebrews put it: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb. 12:22–23).

Our future is one of stunning, uncorrupted, soul-satisfying worship. This future is the vision God gave John: "Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!'" (Rev. 5:11–12).

On this side of heaven, there is no perfect corporate worship service. But whenever a local church gathers, God's people claim a stake in their glorious future. The Lord Jesus is with us as we prepare for perfect worship in the life to come. Andrew Young, writing in 1838, put it well:

There is a happy land, far, far away

Where saints in glory stand, bright, bright as day.

Oh, how they sweetly sing, "Worthy is our Savior King!"

name of the Lord who is with us.

Loud let his praises ring, praise, praise for aye.

— Aaron Menikoff

THE WEIGHT OF WORSHIP

I know you care about corporate worship, and I hope you will enjoy spending a little extra time this year considering what God would have us do when we gather. However, the goal isn't finally our enjoyment. We believe the world needs the corporate worship of local churches. Just as God has called you, as an individual, to bear witness to Christ in your neighborhood, so God has called us, as his church, to bear corporate witness to Christ in our city.

According to theologian Don Carson, we ought to care about corporate worship because our gatherings are evidence that Jesus is alive! In his 2002 work, *Worship by the Book*, he argues there is a connection between corporate worship and evangelism:

One of the most compelling witnesses to the truth of the gospel is a church that is authentic in its worship—and here I use the word worship in the most comprehensive sense but certainly including corporate worship. A congregation so concerned not to cause offense that it manages to entertain and amuse but never to worship God either in the way it lives or in its corporate life carries little credibility to a burned-out postmodern generation that rejects linear thought yet hungers for integrity of relationships. Because we are concerned with the truth of the gospel, we must teach and explain; because we are not simply educating people but seeking to communicate the glorious gospel of Christ, the authenticity of our own relationship with him grounded in personal faith and in an awareness not only of sins forgiven and of eternal life but also of the sheer glory and majesty of our Maker and Redeemer, carries an enormous weight.

Those words are as true now as when Carson wrote them twenty years ago. Our neighbors don't simply need to understand our theology; they need to see our worship. They need more than our views on the atonement, last things, and gender. They must also know that our hearts *burn* to make much of Jesus our Lord. How will they see it? They'll see it in lives ordered around the gospel, the Savior, and the church. And should they be brave and peek in on our time of corporate worship, they will see eyes looking up, voices soaring, sinners crying, and, yes, hearts rejoicing in the Lamb who was slain.

This year, as we give extended time to thinking about corporate worship, let's pray the world sees the Savior exalted at Mount Vernon as each week we call upon the

Does God Care How We Worship?

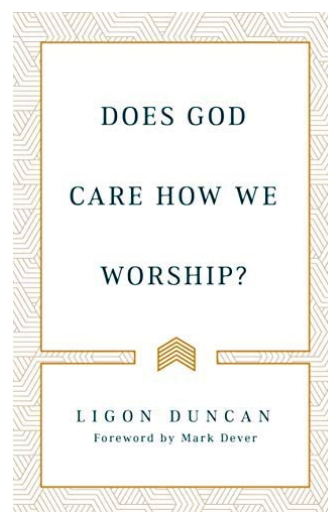
Written by Ligon Duncan

In *Does God Care How We Worship?*, Ligon Duncan defends and applies the regulative principle “that worship in its content, motivation, and aim is to be determined by God alone” (21). In other words, God, through Scripture, regulates corporate worship. Part One defines this principle and argues that it is not outmoded but biblical. Duncan’s examination of several Scripture passages reveals that God is not indifferent to how we worship him. On the contrary, he gave precise prescriptions to Israel and the church for worship. Part Two further argues for this principle by considering biblical, theological realities such as the doctrine of God and human’s idolatrous tendencies. Duncan then applies the regulative principle to corporate worship: “Read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible [in the ordinances]” (77). The book ends by observing that this model of worship is “simple, biblical, transferable, flexible, and reverent” (82).

There are several important takeaways from this book. First, God saved us to worship him. God brought Israel out of Egypt for worship (23), and the Father is seeking true worshippers today (John 4:23-24). Second, because of the regulative principle, the less biblical our worship, the less we do, in fact, *worship*. Third, adding to Scripture takes *away* from Scripture because doing so functionally denies its sufficiency (40). Practically, this means we should be loath to add elements to corporate worship not prescribed by God’s word. Fourth, when discussing the regulative principle, the differences between the substance, components, forms, and circumstances of worship are essential to grasp (15). Scripture must be worship’s substance, and each element of corporate worship requires positive Scriptural warrant. However, churches have liberty in the forms and circumstances of worship so long as they do not contradict biblical principles.

This book would benefit those responsible for service planning, service leading, and ensemble leading. It would help such planners lead corporate gatherings thoughtfully and biblically. However, all Christians must remember that the service and ensemble leaders are not worshipping *for* us but *with* us. Therefore, all Christians would benefit from reading this book because we are all called to worship. This book is a helpful reminder that worship is about God, not ourselves; therefore, we must worship according to his word.

– Recommended by Tyler Ziemer



Excerpts from the Book

1

“Worshiping according to our ideas, however sincere, is an act of self-worship and specifically the worship of our own wills and wants.”

– *God’s Pervasive Concern for How He Is Worshipped*, p. 46

2

“Worship is both active and passive: we come to bless and to receive God’s blessing (Ps. 134). Christian corporate worship is Father-focused, Christ-centered, and Spirit-enabled (Eph. 1:3-14).”

– *Knowing That, What, Whom, When, Where, Why, and How*, p. 72

3

“There is a god we want and the God who is, and the two are not the same. The only way to be sure that we have the whom of worship right is to worship according to God’s written self-revelation.”

– *Knowing That, What, Whom, When, Where, Why, and How*, p. 72

Corporate Worship:

How the Church Gathers as God's People

Written by Matt Merker

What does understanding the local church have to do with worship? According to Matt Merker—*everything*. In this book, Merker argues that a biblical view of the church guides how members engage in gathered worship. Because the church is a gathering, meeting together *is* the essence of congregational life. God is the one who gathers his people in local churches by his grace. He assembles his people to exalt his name, edify one another, and evangelize the nations. God governs how a church worships him by his all-sufficient word; this is "the regulative principle."

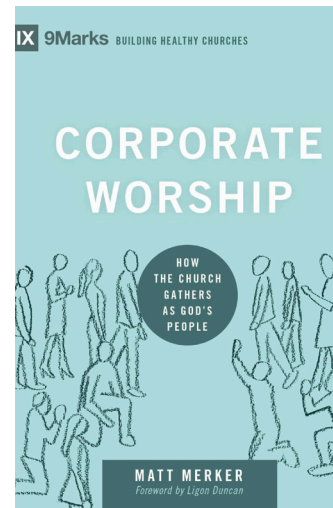
Corporate worship is not limited to singing but includes all service elements. The whole church participates in reading the word, preaching the word, prayer, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and singing. Merker says that "singing is a part of the ministry of God's Word" (137). Therefore, elders need to oversee the ministry of singing. For the same reason, a church should prioritize the sound of the human voice over the instruments. Also, a church must prioritize unity and love when considering musical style.

After reading this book, my appreciation of the congregational gathering at Mount Vernon increased. I also learned that "sincerity is not enough to make our worship acceptable" (80)—we must worship God according to his revelation. God is holy, and we are fallen creatures. In our idolatrous minds, we are utterly ignorant of how to relate to God rightly. So in God's kindness, he revealed himself, proclaimed the way of salvation, and taught us how to worship him rightly.

Lastly, I learned how to sing with other saints. Before I rightly understood corporate worship, I saw the singing element of the service more as an individual activity. I focused on *my* feeling that day, *my* singing, and *my* experience. However, I learned that congregational singing frees me from the tyranny of individualism. Now I sing to exalt God not as a solo but with his family in Christ. I also sing to serve others—my singing edifies and instructs other believers, and other saints' singing does the same for me (Col 3:16).

Read this book! I recommend it to all members. You will learn what it means to worship God corporately and rightly. As a result, your appreciation for our congregation will increase, your singing will be richer, and your reverence of God will grow.

— Recommended by Soonhyong Kwon



Excerpts from the Book

1

"The whole gathering is 'worship,' not just the singing and music."

— Introduction, p. 25

2

"When you become a church member, you also become a Sunday school teacher—by opening your mouth in congregational singing."

— *Why Does God Gather Us?*, p. 66

3

"God, by his Word, governs what the local church should do when it gathers."

— *What Should We Do When We Gather?*, p. 78

JANUARY

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

January 1	Joshua 1:1–9	January 17	Romans 3:27–31
January 2	Romans 1:1–7	January 18	Romans 4:1–8
January 3	Romans 1:8–17	January 19	Romans 4:9–12
January 4	Romans 1:18–32	January 20	Psalms 19:1–11
January 5	Romans 2:1–11	January 21	Romans 4:13–25
January 6	Isaiah 48:1–11	January 22	Romans 1:18–32
January 7	Romans 2:12–16	January 23	Habakkuk 1
January 8	Romans 1:1–7	January 24	Psalms 13
January 9	Romans 1:8–17	January 25	Psalms 35
January 10	Romans 2:17–29	January 26	Psalms 90
January 11	Romans 3:1–8	January 27	Acts 13:16–41
January 12	Romans 3:9–20	January 28	Deuteronomy 28
January 13	Habakkuk 1:12–2:5	January 29	Habakkuk 1
January 14	Romans 3:21–26	January 30	Romans 2:1–11
January 15	Romans 1:8–17	January 31	Romans 5:1–5
January 16	Romans 1:18–32		

*Sermons in bold

TAKE UP & READ

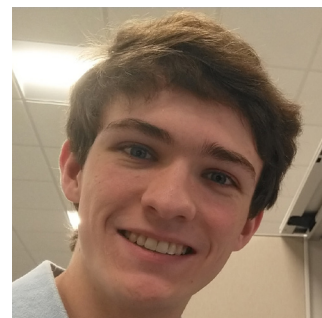
NEW MEMBERS



Joy Baxley



Natalie
Menikoff



Micah Morris



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH