

PERSPECTIVE

MAY 2023

Yes, God cares
**how we worship
together.**

CONTENTS



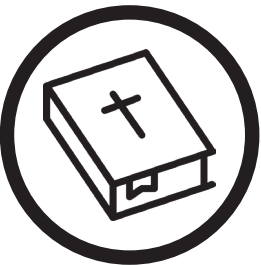
ARTICLE 1
Yes, God Cares How We Worship
Zack DiPrima



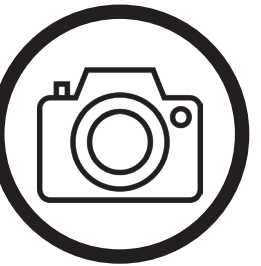
BOOK HIGHLIGHT 5
Listen Up! A Practical Guide to Listening to Sermons
Written by Christopher Ash
Recommended by Jaynie Timmons



BOOK HIGHLIGHT 6
Unleashing the Word: Rediscovering the Public Reading of Scripture
Written by Max McClean & Warren Bird
Recommended by Madison Strickland



BIBLE READING PLAN 7
Take Up & Read
May



NEW MEMBERS 8
Lisa Anderson, Michael Bullock, Brad & Casey Cone, Sam & Rachel Edwards, Eilene Epperson, Hannah Lupas, Alex Ragan, Derik Rogers, Steven & Margie Still

Yes, God Cares How We Worship Together

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

When I was in college, I visited a large church in my town. This church was known for great evangelistic success and a thriving music ministry. They had earned national acclaim for their explosive growth. I wanted to see what all the fuss was about, so I went to a gathering. The service opened with a well-trained band covering a pop song (a Justin Bieber tune, if I recall correctly). Come to find out, this church made it a regular practice to open services with secular songs as a way of making unbelievers feel comfortable. They even once played “Highway to Hell” by AC/DC at an Easter service to prepare folks for hearing the gospel.

I doubt anyone at Mount Vernon would be persuaded to repeat this practice. However well-intentioned, it’s simply outrageous to play an AC/DC song at a gathering of God’s people on the Lord’s Day.

Years later, I visited another church when I was on vacation. At this particular church, many members had just returned home from a mission trip overseas. The lead pastor chose to dedicate the entire morning service to interviewing a panel of members about the trip. Though it was encouraging to hear how these brothers and sisters boldly shared the gospel in a foreign country, I remember thinking something felt out of place. It seemed inappropriate for a church to turn their entire worship service into an extended mission trip update.

Just a few months ago, another elder and I visited a small church in Georgia. The church shared a lot of similarities to Mount Vernon. However, in the middle of the service, one of the pastors gave some announcements. He acknowledged that it was the birthday of one of the older members in the church. He then led the whole congregation in singing “Happy Birthday” to that member.

What do you think about these examples? My guess is that most of us respond to these anecdotes differently. In considering the first example, we naturally agree that it’s wrong to sing secular songs in Sunday morning services. In thinking about the second example, most of us probably

think it’s not the best use of time to spend a whole gathering discussing a mission trip. But we wouldn’t say it’s necessarily *wrong*. And while many of us might think it’s strange to sing happy birthday to a member at a church service, some might think it’s a sweet gesture.

I want to suggest that each of these are examples of things that should *not* be done in a Sunday morning gathering of a local church, regardless of the motivation. Though they vary in severity, I believe they’re all prohibited by the same principle. The principle is this: **God cares how his people worship. And because he cares, he’s given clear instruction in his Word.**

YES, GOD CARES HOW WE WORSHIP TOGETHER

Many Christians believe we have the freedom to structure our services however we want. *Surely, we’re free to do any good thing when we gather as long as it’s not sinful. As long as our hearts are in the right place, God doesn’t care all that much, right?* Wrong. A cursory reading of the Bible clearly indicates that God deeply cares about *how* he’s worshiped. In Exodus 20, Moses delivers the Ten Commandments. The first commandment prohibits the worship of any other gods, while the second commandment prohibits any form of idolatry. The Lord not only cares that we worship the right God but that we worship the right God *rightly*.

Throughout the Old Testament, God judged well-intentioned people for worshiping him in ways he had not prescribed. We see a prime example of this when Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire on the altar, a practice unauthorized by God’s law (Leviticus 10). These two priests were swiftly punished: *“So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.”*

But surely God has different standards in the New Testament. True, the nature of New Covenant worship is vastly different from the Old Covenant. However, God still cares how his people worship him. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul writes to Timothy, *“I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, 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.”* The apostle gives significant attention to what Christians do when they gather. We see this concern reiterated in 1 Corinthians 11–14, where Paul issues rebukes and offers detailed instruction on worship. He concludes his treatment of the topic with, *“all things should be done decently and in order”* (1 Corinthians 14:40).

According to the Bible, when it comes to our gatherings, our first question should not be, “what would lead to the most conversions?” Nor should it be, “what are some good things for Christians to do when they gather?” Rather, the question should be “what pleases God?” Or more particularly, “how does the Bible inform our worship gatherings?” At Mount Vernon, we wish to promote biblically-ordered worship. This means we think Scripture informs, prescribes, and governs everything we do on Sunday mornings.

BRIEF EXPLANATION OF THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

We uphold what the Protestant Reformers referred to as the “regulative principle.” This principle articulates that God has indicated how churches are to worship him. One Reformed confession, The Second London Baptist Confession of 1689, states it this way:

*The light of nature shows that there is a God, who has lordship and sovereignty over all; is just, good and does good to all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.*ⁱ

At Mount Vernon, we believe that God alone has the right to determine how his people will worship him. Thus, we include in our public worship service only those elements which are commanded by God in Scripture, whether by precept or by right and proper inference from the example of the early church. We preach the Word, pray the Word, read the Word, sing the Word, and see the Word to show that the Scriptures are sufficient to nourish and sustain the people of God.ⁱⁱ

The Reformers distinguished between elements, forms, and circumstances in worship. “Elements” refers to the main fixtures of a church’s gathering: congregational singing, preaching, praying, etc. Meanwhile, a “form” refers to how a church carries out each element. A church might use a bulletin or projector screen for its congregational singing. A preacher might preach with a manuscript or bullet point outline. A church may sing *a capella* or with the aid of a band. A “circumstance” refers to things in a service that may be included prudentially for

providential reasons. I’ll provide an example of this from our own service below. In short, the Reformers believed that Scripture prescribed the elements of corporate worship, but there was relative freedom in the forms and circumstances of how those elements were conducted.

Though what I’m writing about the regulative principle would generally apply to all our Lord’s Day services, I primarily have in mind our Sunday morning gathering since this is the meeting that we expect every member to attend regularly. In other words, this is our main assembly and the way we seek to fulfill Hebrews 10:25. I don’t have our Sunday evening service in view or other midweek meetings (Wednesday Evening, Covenant Groups, etc.).

We should appreciate that the regulative principle does not only prohibit us from doing obviously ridiculous things, like playing secular music in the middle of a service. It also elbows out otherwise wholesome things. God’s Word does not indicate that we should have prolonged mission trip interviews in our worship. God’s Word does not indicate that we should celebrate someone’s birthday in the corporate gathering. But there are certain elements clearly prescribed in the Bible.

WHAT WE DO AT MOUNT VERNON

As I write this article, I’m looking at one of Mount Vernon’s latest bulletins. Every one of our bulletins includes an order of service. Let’s think about how the Bible and church tradition informs what we do when we gather on Sunday mornings.

- ♦ **Song:** Often, the first thing listed in our order of service is a song. The apostle Paul exhorts 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 a must in corporate worship. It is God’s desire that the local church’s music ministry be comprised of an untrained choir of blood-bought saints, also known as “the congregation.”
- ♦ **Welcome:** Next in our services, we have a “welcome.” This is a time when one of our pastors greets the church and usually makes a few announcements. While perhaps “welcoming” and “greeting” could be defended as an element of Corporate Worship (Romans 15:7), we largely view this part of our service as a circumstance. Providentially, it seems prudent to inform the congregation of immanent and pertinent details about our life together, like whether or not we’re gathering again in the evening.

- ♦ **Prayer of Confession:** We usually follow the welcome with a prayer of confession. Not only does confession befit the nature of prayer, but we see prayers of confession in the Psalms, which we're commanded to sing (Colossians 3, Ephesians 5). Psalm 32 and Psalm 51 are wonderful examples of such prayers.
- ♦ **Prayer of Praise & Thanksgiving:** After more songs, we usually have a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. Such prayers are prescribed and exemplified throughout the New Testament (Acts 4, 1 Timothy 2:1–2).
- ♦ **Corporate Reading:** In every service, we have an extended reading of Scripture. Once again, we do this because the Bible tells us to: Paul wrote to Timothy, *"devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture"* (1 Timothy 4:3). Yes, if you are reading carefully, you'll notice the command to read Scripture in the New Testament is much clearer and more direct than the example of praying prayers of confession in the Old Testament. Nonetheless, we know that God's gathered people did both in the context of corporate worship, and so do we.
- ♦ **Sermon:** About half of our gathering is dedicated to the preaching of God's Word. There are many reasons for this, not least for the fact that the church was built upon the apostles' preaching and teaching. And this priority didn't end with the apostles. Paul reiterated the preeminence of preaching to Timothy in his final letter: *"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching"* (2 Timothy 4:1–2). The pulpit of the church has rightly been described as the rudder of the ship. If it falters, the congregation will inevitably drift into unfaithfulness.
- ♦ **Benediction:** Every service concludes with a benediction. This can be viewed as a combination of various elements already mentioned. We often use benedictions pulled directly from Scripture. We sometimes use benedictions from church tradition. Regardless, they are prayers of blessing ("Benedictus" is Latin for "blessed") designed to consecrate the entire congregation to the triune, eternal, unchanging God.

We see similar biblical warrant in other elements of our corporate worship, though we might not do them every

week. For example, we don't conduct baptisms, partake of the Lord's Supper, or recite creeds every week.

APPLICATION

At its essence, the main principle governing our corporate worship is a simple trust in God's mighty Word. We believe God cares how he's worshiped; thus, he's given us marching orders. We believe the Scriptures inform, prescribe, and govern everything we do. We believe it's God's good design for our services to be regulated according to the Bible. This should certainly inform what we look for in a local church. But how else should we respond to this truth?

REJOICE IN THE FREEDOM OF SIMPLICITY

While it may seem restrictive to assert the necessity of a biblically-ordered liturgy, we should rejoice in the freedom and simplicity of our worship. As Christians, we don't have to spin our wheels and wonder how to glorify God when we gather. He has spoken. His Word is clear. We can worship God according to Scripture, comforted by the conviction that he is pleased by those who approach him in spirit and truth. Indeed, our heavenly Father is seeking such worshipers (John 4)!

RESIST ADDING TO OR SUBTRACTING FROM GOD'S WORD

The regulative principle—the notion that God cares how he's worshiped—should cause us to refrain from any attitude of indifference to our gatherings. We should care deeply about pleasing God in worship. This means we should always endeavor to bring our services into greater conformity with his will as expressed in the Bible. But at the same time, the regulative principle should not make us rigid sticklers. We should be allergic to any and all forms of legalism. We must beware of making manmade standards for our services. We should also cultivate the ability to discern the difference between an element of worship and a form. The Bible might be clear about the former when it's unclear about the latter. In all things, we should resist the temptation to add or subtract from God's Word.

ELEVATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS TO GATHERED WORSHIP

As we have seen, God has given tremendous attention in his Word to the manner in which he's worshiped. This should instruct us about the importance of what we do when we gather. God derives peculiar glory from the explicit praise of his people. As long as you're a member

of Mount Vernon, the most important thing in your life is what happens between 10:30 a.m. and 12:15 p.m. on Sundays. **The corporate worship of God's people is the most profound event in Christian experience.** In 1 Corinthians 14, the apostle Paul highlights what should be the response of an unbeliever or outsider when they visit a well-ordered church gathering. Far from being stifled by a sense of rigidity, *"the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you"* (1 Corinthians 14:25). This should fill us with a sense of great expectation, fear, wonder, and awe every time we meet. We can have full confidence that our great God will draw near to us when we draw near to him.

— Zack DiPrima

ⁱ *The Second London Baptist Confession*, Chapter 22, Paragraph 1

ⁱⁱ One of the best short resources on this topic is Ligon Duncan's book, *Does God Care How We Worship?*

Listen Up!

A Practical Guide to Listening to Sermons

Written by Christopher Ash

At first glance, this might seem like an unnecessary book to pick up. Listening is not hard to do...right? Jesus says in Luke 8:18 to “*consider carefully how you listen.*” The first half of this book highlights seven ways to grow as godly listeners. The second half offers advice on listening to a lousy sermon and encouraging your pastor as he prepares and delivers sermons. Every section ends with helpful, practical thoughts to consider how well you are listening and suggests ways you might consider changing to become a better listener, one who is a humble and eager recipient of God’s Word.

The best thing about this book on sermons is that it’s about the joy of listening to the preached Word of God. It’s a privilege to come under the authority of God’s Word each week. So how do we squeeze out every last drop of that privilege from Sunday mornings? We come prepared, confident in God’s mysterious power to use his living and active Word, gathered with covenanted members to hear and respond together, and banking on God’s grace to help us change and press further into holiness and Christlikeness each week.

In reading this small booklet, I was encouraged to prepare for Sunday morning by preparing myself on Saturday night! Whether that means going to bed earlier or praying more seriously for God to use the preaching to shape and change us, this book provides many practical ways to grow as listeners. It’s an excellent read for anyone struggling with focusing, appreciating, or applying the sermon. *Listen Up!* would also be quick and practical to review with your middle- and high-school-aged children to help them think well about listening and being prepared to receive God’s Word through the sermon.

– Recommended by Jaynie Timmons

LISTEN UP!

A practical guide to listening to sermons



CHRISTOPHER ASH

Excerpts from the Book

1

“We are to listen to sermons expectantly because Jesus gives the authority of God himself to the preacher who teaches the Bible accurately and prayerfully. Jesus governs his church by the written Word of Scripture. The main way he does this is...by the written Word being preached and taught.”

– “Expect God to Speak” p. 4

2

“You and I must not only take seriously the voice of God; we must bow the knee in submission when He speaks. We must come humbly to the preaching of God’s Word.”

– “Admit God Knows Better Than You” p. 7

3

“We need not a random series of sermon fixes, but to sit together regularly, week by week, under the systematically preached Word of God. And as we are taken through the teaching of the Bible by patient exposition, gradually Christlikeness is worked in our characters, our affections, our desires, our decisions, and our lives.”

– “Be There Week by Week” p. 16

Unleashing the Word

Rediscovering the Public Reading of Scripture

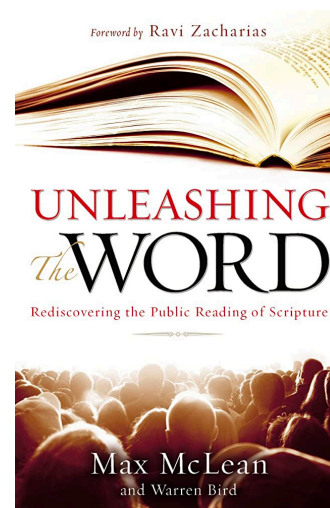
Written by Max McLean & Warren Bird

We read Scripture at every corporate worship gathering, so a book on public Scripture reading might feel superfluous. However, McLean and Bird deliver helpful insight into why this corporate reading is essential and what it means for the readers and hearers of the Word. The first section outlines why they wrote *Unleashing the Word* and begins with their personal experiences with public Scripture reading. The final portions provide practical guidance for preparing readings and advocating for such practices at your church. While I remain unconvinced of some of McLean's views about the necessity of talented readers and an emotional experience for the audience, I wholeheartedly agree that God's living and active Word has the power to change hearts and deserves our special attention and reverence in the corporate worship service.

Max McLean is an actor turned theologian who has sought to use his vocal and performance training to present God's Word in both the secular and Christian world. In the church, McLean advocates for what he calls "*vocal exegesis*" (28), which "help[s] people to recognize their predicament and to move them toward a more humble understanding of themselves and a closer relationship with God" (25). McLean finds a flat or detached reading of Scripture to be more than a just little boring. Instead, he argues that such a reading does a disservice to those who hear. He defines the role of the reader as "elevat[ing] the Scripture passage on which the sermon teaching was based through careful interpretation and phrasing, bringing forth the meaning of the text with power and clarity" (54).

How might the reading of this book influence members of Mount Vernon, who already have a high view of Scripture and prioritize its reading at corporate worship services? While we can lay aside McLean's suggestions to audition readers (33), to seek out actors and musicians for such a role (55), and to believe that we become the "incarnate" Word when reading Scripture publicly (61), we might apply his method for training our own Scripture readers. McLean's training as an actor and faithful heart as a Christian are evident in his approach, which anyone reading Scripture publicly (at church, a wedding, a funeral, etc.) might employ. This book expounds upon his four-step method: (1) Break the text down into digestible thoughts. (2) Identify action verbs and outline the flow of the text. (3) Spend time meditating on the text in your personal devotion and prayer life. (4) Practice your delivery aloud like you were having an animated conversation with a friend. He recommends repeating this final step seven times before public reading. Perhaps we might incorporate a semesterly training for Scripture readers to exhort and equip them to prepare their reading thoughtfully and prayerfully. Whether you are a reader or hearer of the Word during the corporate worship gathering, this book is an encouraging exhortation to come to Scripture with reverence and expectation every Sunday.

– Recommended by Madison Strickland



Excerpts from the Book

1

"Churches need people who will read Scripture with enthusiasm, conviction, and disciplined preparation."

– "Recruiting Others Who Love the Game" p. 30

2

"Reading the Bible in a flat, detached way does a disservice to it; the practice reinforces negative stereotypes of the Bible as being boring, difficult, and confusing...The reader must convey the passion of the unfolding drama so that listeners can fully capture the logic of the story and get an accurate sense of what really happened."

– "How to Sound Like You" p. 64

3

"You have the words of life, words that people need to hear in order to know how to have right relationship with God, and words that offer help for our brokenness and hope for our eternal futures. You're reading about the Creator of the universe who knows the number of hairs on our heads and who cares when a sparrow falls from a tree...God's perfect, infallible Word has become accessible to human minds and hearts—and you have the honor of reading it."

– "From the Page to the Stage" p. 86

MAY

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

May 1	John 21:1–19	May 17	Romans 15:8–13
May 2	John 19:1–16	May 18	Romans 15:14–21
May 3	John 19:17–42	May 19	Ezekiel 36:22–37
May 4	John 20:1–18	May 20	Romans 15:22–33
May 5	Jeremiah 3:11–17	May 21	Romans 6:1–14
May 6	John 20:19–31	May 22	Romans 6:15–23
May 7	John 21:1–19	May 23	Romans 16:1–2
May 8	Romans 5:12–21	May 24	Romans 16:3–16
May 9	Romans 14:1–4	May 25	Romans 16:17–24
May 10	Romans 14:5–12	May 26	Proverbs 14:1–12
May 11	Romans 14:13–19	May 27	Romans 16:25–27
May 12	Genesis 3:1–13	May 28	Romans 6:15–23
May 13	Romans 14:20–23	May 29	Matthew 8:8–17
May 14	Romans 5:12–21		
May 15	Romans 6:1–14		
May 16	Romans 15:1–7		

*Sermons in bold

TAKE UP & READ

NEW MEMBERS



**Lisa
Anderson**



**Michael
Bullock**



**Brad
Cone**



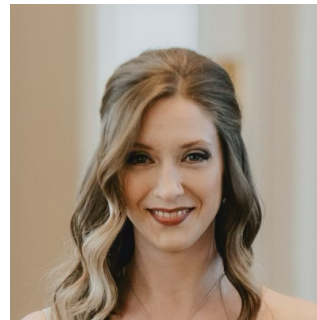
**Casey
Cone**



**Sam
Edwards**



**Rachel
Edwards**



**Eilene
Epperson**



**Hannah
Lupas**



**Alex
Ragan**



**Derik
Rogers**



**Steven
Still**



**Margie
Still**



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH