

COLOSSIANS 3:16–17. (EHV)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God. And everything you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Our English word *worship* is derived from the Old English word *weorthscipe*, which means “worthiness *or* valuation of [someone’s] worth.” In other words, the idea is that when we worship God, we declare and show others his worth.

We do that in two different ways, both of which Paul talks about in these two verses of Colossians. First, we worship in everything that we say and do. After all, God redeemed us from the devil’s ownership by the blood of his Son. We belong to God now. Everything we say and do, we say and do as those who belong to him. I’ve talked about Pastor Strieter before, a Lutheran pastor from the late 1800s. He once cited this passage in a congregational meeting, and one of his members somewhat snarkily replied, “Should I then haul manure in the name of Jesus too?” And Pastor Strieter correctly replied, “By all means, and everything you cannot do in the name of Jesus, you must discontinue.” Our entire life on earth ought to be a continual act of worship in the name of Jesus.

But we worship God in a special way, a way God also commands and encourages, when we gather together with other believers around God’s word and sacraments in Jesus’s name, to teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in our hearts to God.

We’ve already begun to cover the first kind of worship when we covered the Christian home and Christian life in society. Today we want to focus on the second kind of worship, worship in the narrow sense, if you will. We want to look to the Scriptures for the principles of Christian worship. We typically call them the principles of worship because God has not prescribed an exact form for our worship in the New Testament, like he did in large part for the believers in the Old Testament. He has left many aspects of our worship in the realm of Christian freedom. But he has given us principles to guide our worship, so that it takes place in a way that pleases him. So I’ll cover four principles. First, I’ll state the principle. Then we’ll look at passages that support the principle. Then we’ll look at ways the principle is on display in our services.

1. Let the Gospel Predominate

The first principle of Christian worship is the most important and should be the most precious to us: The gospel should predominate. That is, even though we also talk about and learn God’s commands and his will for our life as summed up in the Ten Commandments, we should come away from our worship refreshed with good news of what God has done for us in his Son, Jesus Christ. We just heard Paul say, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” If all we talk about are do’s and don’ts, then we aren’t letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly. We’re letting the word of Moses the lawgiver dwell in us richly. Paul wrote elsewhere, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). And, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Rom. 10:17). The gospel should predominate.

Did you notice how Jesus himself set an example for us in this in our Gospel (Luke 4:16–21)? In the first sermon of his that we have on record, Jesus basically preached: God promised that his Messiah would come to preach good news, freedom, recovery of sight, and the year of the Lord’s favor. Well, guess what? He has kept that promise. Here I am.” And Luke goes on to tell us that the audience was impressed by the words of *grace* that came from his mouth.

God’s grace in Christ should be the primary focus of our worship. Why? Paul tells us that through the law we become conscious of sin. The law always accuses and condemns us. That’s not the only thing it does, but it does always do that. Let me give an example. Sometimes the good news of Jesus leads us to ask like John the Baptist’s audience did: “So what should we do? How do we bear the fruit of this message?” When John then told them what to do, the law was serving as a guide for them. But if they reflected on it further, it was also condemning them, because they would never carry out his instructions perfectly. So the law can’t be the last word of worship. Sure, there may be times when, due to special circumstances, a fire and brimstone sermon may be necessary. But that should be the exception, not the rule.

How do we see this principle on display in our services? Hopefully in gospel-saturated sermons. We also see it in the liturgy, which we’ll talk more about later. The liturgy insures that, even if I have an off Sunday and end up leaving you all feeling crushed and weighed down by the time I say “Amen,” if you’re paying attention to the liturgy, you cannot go away crushed and weighed down. It always puts Christ your Savior, Christ for you, firmly before your eyes and ears.

So here’s the irony of our worship. Even though the English word *worship* carries the connotation that we will be showing God what he is worth, he wants the primary focus of our worship to be on him showing us what we were worth to him, what we are worth to him, in Christ Jesus. The best way we serve God is by letting him serve us. What did Jesus himself say? “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). This is the way we honor him best—by letting him serve us and refresh our souls with his victory, forgiveness, and salvation.

2. Let the People Participate

The second principle of Christian worship is that the people should participate. Paul alludes to that here when we talk about us teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom, including with our hymns. This principle flows from one of the teachings of the gospel, a teaching called the universal priesthood of all believers.

Remember what happened when Jesus died for our sins? The curtain of the temple, which marked the boundary behind which only the high priest could cross one day every year, tore in two from top to bottom. The significance of that event was to show that all believers in Christ are now priests, called and equipped to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, called and equipped to declare his praises. Yes, God wants Christians to call public ministers to preach and teach the gospel on their behalf publicly, as their representatives, but they are simply called to do what every Christian already has the God-given right and duty to do within the scope of their everyday callings, by virtue of their baptism. So it is good and right to give God’s people the opportunity to exercise their priesthood in worship. Worship shouldn’t just be: Come and watch the show that’s taking place up front.

How do we see this principle on display in our services? For one thing, we see it in our hymns. Hymns tend to be musically straightforward and to encourage congregational participation. Even when you might not like a tune, it's not usually because you can't sing it.

Paul also reminds us here that the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs we sing together are to be one of the ways we teach and admonish one another. That means that they need to have strong scriptural content. The words, not the music, are the most important part of a song used in Christian worship. There can be a place for songs that simply repeat a simple Christian truth or a simple Christian encouragement, but these should not be our bread and butter. We should have a good repertoire of songs that help us to teach and admonish one another. Here again is where songs in the hymn style tend to excel.

As for musical instruments, we'll talk more about those under a later principle.

The principle of letting the people participate also assumes that people are there to participate. It assumes that we are taking the Bible's encouragement seriously not to neglect meeting together. I often struggle with how to preach on regular church attendance as a pastor. First, I am aware that people could easily say in response to such encouragements, "That's easy for you to say; we pay you to be here every Sunday." But I also struggle because I don't want to end up in a place where the law is predominating. In one way, it's easy not to let the law predominate because the Bible never prescribes a certain regularity of worship attendance for New Testament believers. It assumes that they will do it. It encourages them to do it more and more as Judgment Day gets closer. But it never comes out and says, "If you're a Christian, you will be in church every week *or* this many times a month."

But if God did tell the Old Testament believers that they had to gather together for sacred assembly once a week, every Saturday, does it make sense that we in the New Testament would attend less often than they, now that we have seen Jesus fulfill the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament? We heard Luke report earlier that Jesus went into the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath, "as was his custom" every Sabbath. If anyone could honestly say he didn't get anything out of church, it was Jesus, and he was there every week. Do we need church less than he? Then there are the excuses I hear, some of which are legitimate, but others are related to things like harvest and hunting, and it's easy for me to think, "Who controls the weather? Who blesses the harvest? Who causes the deer to go past your tree stand?" See? Even though these are legitimate, biblical thoughts to take into account, it is easy to suddenly end up in a place where the law predominates and we are driven by guilt, not grace.

So let's try this route instead: Have you reflected on the fact that God told his Old Testament believers to go to church on the day *on which they were not to do any work*? In other words, God was reinforcing our first principle, that the gospel predominates in our worship and so worship is not work! Worship is rest, rest for our souls. We don't come here primarily to give to God, but to receive from him and to be refreshed by him. Here is where your soul is re-energized in the most comprehensive way. So yes, friends, participate in worship, and participate regularly.

3. Let the Experience of the Church Be Honored

The third principle is that we should let the experience of the church be honored. Paul alludes to that here by encouraging us to sing psalms, that is, the hymns that the believers

composed and sang in the Old Testament. The writer to the Hebrews says, “Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls” (Jer. 6:16). Honoring the experience of the church also helps us to follow the apostle Paul’s instruction that everything in our assemblies be done in a fitting and orderly way (1 Cor. 14:40).

We also saw Jesus doing that in our Gospel when he followed the service outline and customs observed by his Jewish ancestors in the synagogue. By the way, that order of service was very similar to ours. There was a creed. There were prayers. There were hymns. There were two Scripture readings and a sermon. This outline was adapted by New Testament Christians and turned into what we now call the liturgy. Using the liturgy is not an obligation, but it is way to honor the experience of our Christian ancestors and it helps us to follow the other principles of Christian worship too. If a tradition doesn’t help us to let the gospel predominate, then we are free to do away with it. But if it does, why would we reject it out of hand?

We don’t just see this principle on display in our liturgy. We see it on display in our decorations, in our symbols, in the pastoral clothing I wear. Not only does my robe help me to wear attire that is respectable (1 Tim. 3:2), it also helps to hide me as an individual and to emphasize my position and calling as a pastor, sort of like a gown does for a judge and a lab coat does for a doctor. Then, when I am pronouncing to you that I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of Son and of the Holy Spirit, you are less tempted to hear that as coming from Nathan Biebert, the guy with a stain on his pants or with the tie that doesn’t really match, and instead to hear that as coming from your pastor, the man whom God has called to represent him and to represent you.

Let’s briefly walk through the liturgy that has been handed down to us. You will notice that it alternates between us coming to God and God coming to us. We begin by coming to God in confession. He comes to us in absolution. We then come to him in praise and prayer. He then comes to us in the Scripture lessons, sermon, and gospel proclamation in the Creed. We then come to him in prayer and offering. He then comes to us in the Sacrament. We then come to him in thanksgiving. He then comes to us in blessing. As much as possible, I try to reflect this by either facing you when I am mainly representing God coming to you, or by facing the altar with you when I am mainly representing you coming to God.

4. Let God’s Best Gifts Be Used

The final principle is that God’s best gifts should be used. God has given us his best. He deserves our best. Paul tells us here to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. In 1 Corinthians he tells us to do everything to the glory of God. Jesus summed up the entire Second Table of the law with, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength” (Matt. 22:37).

When this church was first built, I’m guessing it started out pretty spare and spartan, because that’s the best you could afford at the time. But over time you filled it with furnishings and artwork and decorations and instruments like our grand piano. One day those things might eventually be replaced with better ones.

Putting this principle into practice means that when we are discussing purchasing something connected with our worship, we don't just automatically run to the cheapest option. If that's all we can truly afford, fine. But we want to give God our best.

Best often means most beautiful, which means also thinking deeper about beauty. There is a sense in which beauty is subjective or in the eye of the beholder. But there is also such a thing as objective beauty. Objective beauty is tied to God and the things of God. When we get to heaven, it isn't like some of you are going to stand there with your jaws open and say, "Oh my, this is beautiful," while others look around and say, "Eh, to each his own, I guess." No, we are all going to find it beautiful. So what is objectively beautiful? Well, what is God? Among other things, God is eternal, timeless. So we are wise in our worship to shy away from things that are or could be faddy and passing trends. It's good to have a genre of church music that has stood the test of time, and not to try and wedge worship music into the genre of 90s soft rock, which will be a thing of the past someday. That's why it's also good to have a balance between new hymns that we think will stand the test of time and older hymns that have actually stood the test of time.

For instruments, a keyboard of some sort, whether an organ or a piano, is a good place to start, because those are good leading instruments that encourage people to sing along. The organ is unique in that it is one of the few instruments that was specifically developed for Christian worship—both to aid and encourage people in singing and also to convey a sense of the majesty of heaven. But if the congregation has other instrumentalists, it is good to make use of them, too, to the extent they can do so. But as we decide what instruments to use and what styles of playing to use, we will want to make sure that it is the gospel content that predominates and not the instrumentalist or the musical clothing of the gospel content. We will want to make sure that, as much as possible, we are employing tasteful styles and techniques that are timeless rather than passing fads and trends.

And if the gospel should predominate, culture also matters when giving God our best. In some African Christian churches, dance is a part of worship. It comes to them naturally and is performed by them naturally and beautifully. If I had some of us dance as part of worship, most of you would not come away from the service remembering any of the four principles of Christian worship. You would just remember this service as the one where people danced, and probably not all that well.

Let the gospel predominate. Let the people participate. Let the experience of the Church be honored. Let God's best gifts be used. These are the main principles of Christian worship. May God help us to honor these principles in our worship here on earth until the day we join in the perfect worship of saints and angels in heaven. Amen.