

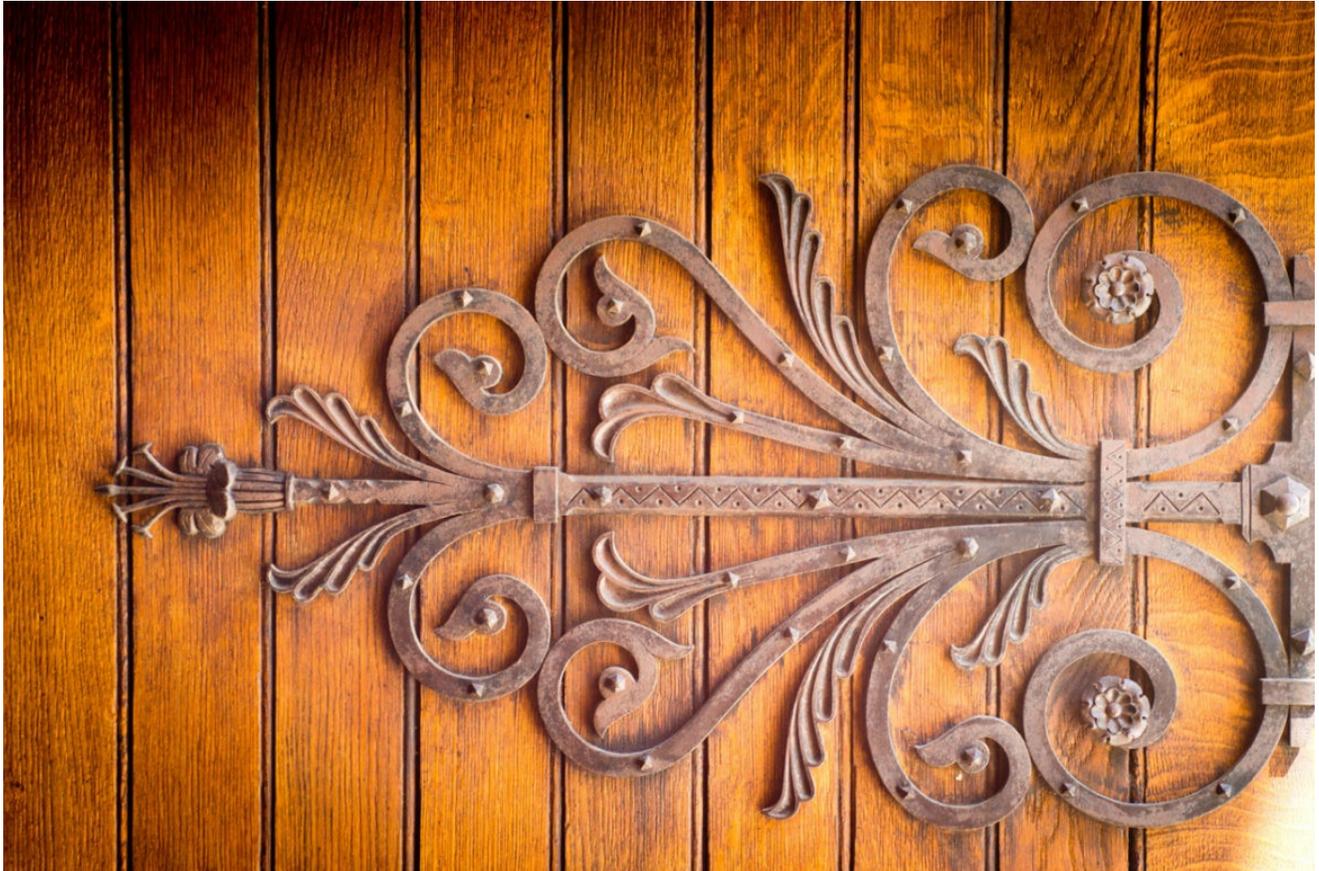
# Public Worship is Discipleship

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Jon Payne

October 31,  
2019



*Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the Aug/Sept 2019 edition of the Banner of Truth magazine.*

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Lord's Day worship is the grand theater of Christian discipleship. It is the main context in which Christians are fashioned into mature disciples of Jesus Christ, through the ordained means of grace. It has been so from the beginning.[1]

In our day, however, the biblical focus of worship *as* discipleship seems to be lost on many of our churches. The accent of disciple-making is placed upon small groups and one-on-one mentoring, rather than upon public worship and the means of grace. Indeed, many believe that discipleship predominantly occurs in living rooms and coffee shops, and not in sanctuaries with the assembled church. This unbiblical notion is more widespread than people realize.

Our churches need to recover the biblical priority of Lord's Day public worship as the primary realm of Christian discipleship.<sup>[2]</sup> Furthermore, we need to reclaim the biblical elements of public worship as the efficacious means to spiritual maturity. In other words, we must recover discipleship on God's terms. Before we explore the nature of worship as discipleship, however, we must first ask: What has gone wrong?

## **A Significant Shift**

As it concerns discipleship, a significant shift took place in the first half of the twentieth century in both the United States and Great Britain. In response to the rising tide of theological liberalism in mainline denominations — on both sides of the Atlantic — parachurch organizations began to sprout and multiply. Understandably, Bible-believing Christians lost confidence in the church. So they began looking elsewhere for spiritual direction. They found it in evangelical parachurch organizations such as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Campus Crusade for Christ, Christianity Today, Christian Student Union, and a host of others. Parachurch organizations like these rightly emphasized a high view of Scripture, biblical conversion, and lifelong spiritual growth and discipleship. Nevertheless, Christian discipleship was repeatedly presented as being only loosely connected to the worship and ministry of the church. It's the idea "that real disciples are formed not in the theater of ordinary Word-and-sacrament ministry and the care of the elders and deacons, but in the parachurch enclaves for super-spirituality."<sup>[3]</sup>

A prime example of this may be seen in The Navigators, a well-known and influential parachurch organization that has specialized in "Life on Life discipleship" since 1933. In the "about" section of their website, not one word is mentioned about the church. Moreover, their statement of faith, core values, and vision statement give no meaningful attention to the ministry of the church or the means of grace. Someone reading this site could easily be led to conclude that the church has very little, if anything, to do with Christian discipleship. It's no wonder, then, why so many evangelicals do not make Lord's Day worship a priority in the disciple-making process.

## **A Right View of Worship**

To rightly understand Lord's Day worship as discipleship, we must first recognize what public worship *is not*. Worship is not an evangelistic crusade meeting.<sup>[4]</sup> Neither is it a time for sanctified entertainment, to showcase the talents of pastors, congregants, musicians, singers, dancers, or actors.<sup>[5]</sup> Nor is public worship an informal church fellowship meeting to energize and inform the flock about up-and-coming programs and service opportunities. While sadly these emphases have become all too familiar in worship services today, nowhere in scripture does divine worship display these characteristics. No, God's word teaches something very different.

Biblical worship is a sacred meeting between God and his covenant people (i.e. the visible church). It's where Christ, through his word and Spirit, matures his disciples. In other words, worship is the sacred context wherein the ascended Christ himself informs, feeds, nourishes, comforts, and fortifies the faith of his flock through the ordinary means of grace. God is not just present with us in public worship, he is *active* among us through his Word, sacraments, and prayer. Therefore, Lord's Day worship is intended to be no less than the salvific in-breaking of the greater, eternal realities of the kingdom of God into the lesser, temporal realities of the kingdoms of man. It's the workshop of the Holy Spirit, and not just another meeting of the church. It's where disciples are made.

Since Lord's Day worship is the primary activity of the church, and essential to Christian discipleship, it's also important to mention that it should be led by the minister. Indeed, God's ministers are "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (I Cor. 4:1). They have been called by God and set apart by the church to lead, feed, and disciple God's people. Therefore, handing over the leadership of public worship to laypeople necessarily undermines the function and priority of worship as discipleship.

### **The Great Commission | Make Disciples**

After his glorious resurrection, shortly before ascending into heaven, Jesus declared to the apostles:

Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.[6]

Notice that Jesus clearly states both the *mandate* and the *means* for the church's mission. The mandate, of course, is to *make disciples of Jesus Christ*. The *means* or tools for fulfilling the mission are the Word of God and sacraments.

The Spirit-filled apostles carried out Christ's mission "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). They went forth boldly *into all nations* proclaiming the gospel, making new disciples, and planting new churches constituted of believers and their children.[7] These churches, led by qualified and appointed elders, were dedicated to the lifelong discipleship of their members through the ordinary means of grace. In other words, in the gathered worship of the church, through the weekly cadence of the faithful ministry of the Word, sacraments, and prayer, the primary work of discipleship was being accomplished.[8]

As the means of grace are faithfully set forth week after week in public worship, and God's special presence is manifested among his covenant people, God is actively discipling his people. The making of disciples in fulfillment of the Great Commission, therefore, is not just something that happens "out there" on the mission field. In other words, it's not just

something that happens among the Aborigines in the Outback or amidst the citizens of Madagascar. No, the making of disciples occurs every Lord's Day in morning and evening worship in every true church. And those congregations that are most committed to making mature disciples at home are usually the ones most dedicated to making disciples around the world. Isn't that how it often works?

Lord's Day worship is also *lifelong discipleship* — a holy anvil of sanctifying grace from the font to the grave. Unlike weeds, mighty Live Oaks do not spring up overnight. Strong and deep roots take years, even decades, to grow. This is also true for the Christian disciple. Consequently, any book or teaching series that promises seven quick steps to Christian maturity misunderstand the nature of discipleship. It's a life-long endeavor— an ultra-marathon, not a sprint.

## **Conclusion**

Parachurch organizations may, and often do, provide helpful avenues and resources for Christian discipleship. Even so, they should never be adopted as a substitute for the ministry and worship of the local church. Moreover, small groups and one-on-one mentoring, while often beneficial, should always be viewed as a fruit of Lord's Day worship/discipleship, and never as an alternative to it. The church and the means of grace are God's idea. To question or replace them, therefore, is to challenge the wisdom of God.

How then should the biblical concept of *worship as discipleship* impact our approach to Lord's Day worship? First, pastors ought to take great care in the preparation and execution of Lord's Day services. Each element of the service, from the call to worship to the benediction, plays a significant role in the lifelong maturation of the Christian disciple. Some treat everything leading up to the preaching as mere frontal matter. That's a mistake. All the elements of public worship are important, even if not equal; and they all play a part in the believer's spiritual formation.

Second, church members ought to diligently and joyfully attend Lord's Day worship services. To neglect worship is, among other things, to disregard Christian discipleship, and to underestimate God's chosen means of grace. Public worship, therefore, is not optional. In fact, it's a non-negotiable for every serious believer.

Hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near[9].

Lord's Day worship is a weekly oasis of grace for Christian pilgrims traveling on the toilsome way of discipleship. Therefore, dear believer, take advantage of all the spiritual benefits God offers you and your family in morning and evening worship. Attend worship with eager and

joyful expectation, believing that Christ matures his followers in the gathered assembly. This is discipleship on God's terms.

*Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it*<sup>[10]</sup>.

<sup>[1]</sup>C.f. Ex. 20:8-11; Ps. 84; Acts 2:42; 20:7; Mark 16:2; I Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10

<sup>[2]</sup>"The skeptic Voltaire once quipped that if you get rid of the Christian Sabbath, you get rid of Christianity. That is not because of a superstitious attachment but because it is on this day that the Triune God has promised to bless the earth with the in-breaking of his kingdom, creating streams in the desert." (Mike Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 184).

<sup>[3]</sup>Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 165.

<sup>[4]</sup>While biblical worship is not by nature an evangelistic meeting, there is most certainly an evangelistic effect that occurs when the gospel is set forth throughout the service. Paul writes, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ." (Rom. 10:17)

<sup>[5]</sup>Many broad evangelical services today look and feel more like variety shows than divine worship services. A church in my community recently featured professional acrobats, clowns, and singers in their Sunday morning service. It was a thirty minute performance, kicking-off a new sermon series by using popular movies like "The Greatest Showman" to connect with the unchurched.

<sup>[6]</sup>Matthew 28:18-20; emphasis mine.

<sup>[7]</sup>Acts 2:38-39; 16:15, 34; Eph. 6:1-4.

<sup>[8]</sup>The early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The Apostle Paul wrote to the young church at Colossae: "Him [Christ] we proclaim ... that we may present *everyonemature in Christ*"(Col. 1:28).

<sup>[9]</sup>Hebrews 10:23-25. Also see WCF 21.6— "God is to be worshiped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as, in private families daily, and in secret, each one by himself; so, *more solemnly in the public assemblies*, which are not carelessly or willfully to be neglected, or forsaken, when God, by his Word or providence, calleth thereunto."

<sup>[10]</sup>1 Thess. 5:23-24



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