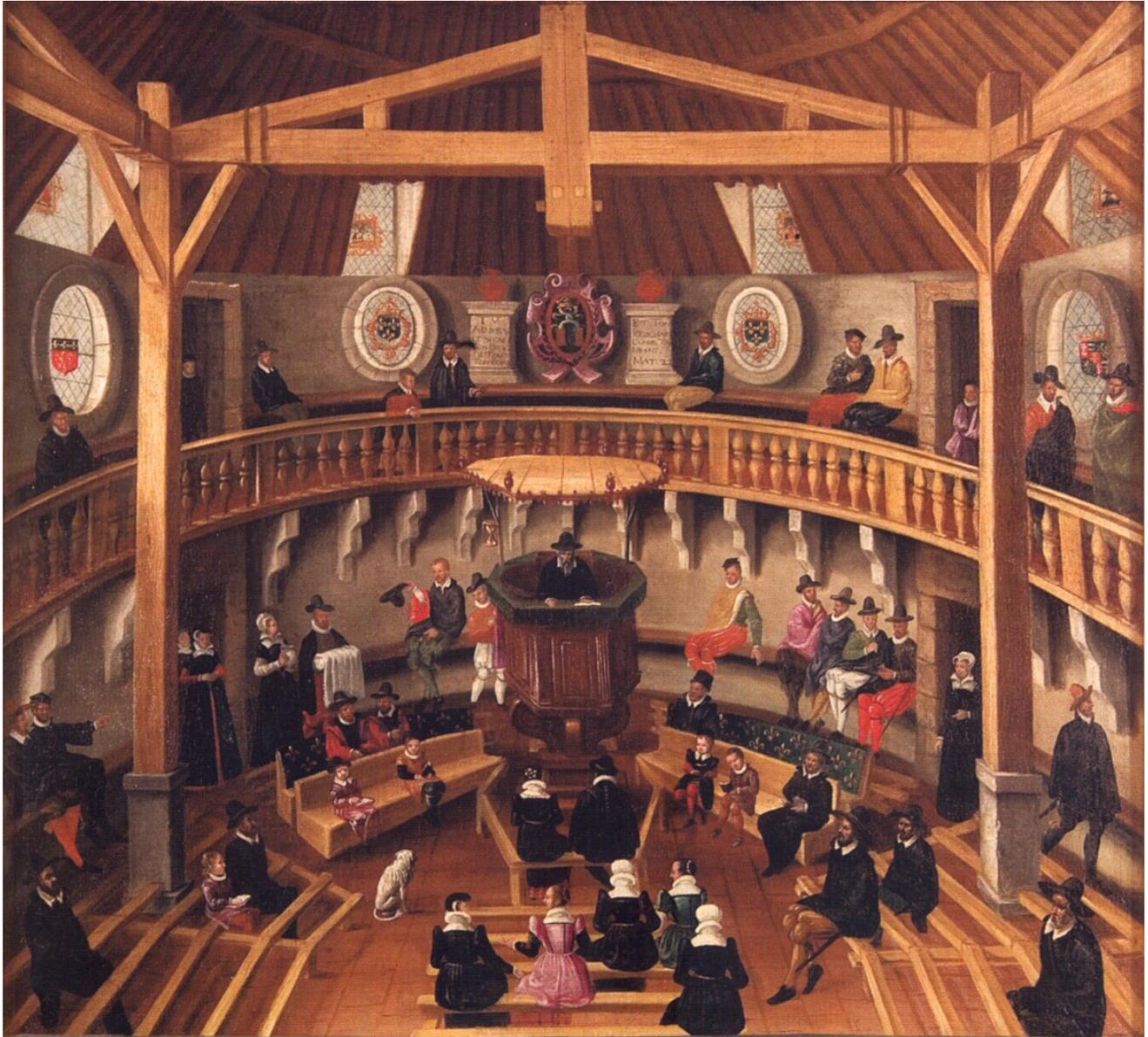


# The High Point of Worship

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Donny Friederichsen

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King David tells us that all of creation declares the glory of God, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1). Everything that was made was made to glorify God. The divine is clearly perceived in all the things that are made (Rom. 1:20). We, who are made by God and in his image, are to reflect that same divine glory. Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (WSC 1). Worship is written into the very fabric of our being. And as Hughes Old adds, “Worship must above all serve the glory of God.”<sup>[1]</sup>

There is a flow to the formal worship of the Church. There are many ways we participate in the worship of God, for example: prayer, the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, partaking of the sacraments, and sitting under the preached Word. While all the elements of properly ordered worship are good, it would not be accurate to say that all elements are equally important. So, what is the high point of our worship? What is center of our worship? Though the Church has gone through periods where these questions were answered differently, the center of worship in the Church has generally been the preaching of God's Word.

When Ezra brings the book of the Law to the assembly in Nehemiah 8, the word is read and then expounded. The Gospels also show the priority of preaching. The Gospels tell the story of Jesus continually going to the synagogue to preach. When Paul traveled to new cities, he would visit the synagogue to preach. Eventually, the early church established their own assemblies, and the practice of preaching God's Word continued. Paul instructs his young disciple, Timothy, "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching" (1 Tim 4:13).

The centrality of preaching in the worship of the church continued into the early church. In the preaching of Origen, Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, and others, we see the practice of *lectio continua*. Worship was marked by the systematic exposition of the Scriptures, week by week, chapter by chapter. The sacraments, singing, and prayer were certainly important components of worship, but the main mast of worship was the preaching of the Word. Beginning around the time of Augustine and Leo the Great (mid-5<sup>th</sup> century), however, this practice was supplanted by a growing reliance on a church calendar and the practice of *lectio selecta*. The use of particular passages on a few days like Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas grew to numerous feasts and fasts on certain saint's days. Preaching through whole books of the Bible turned to specific passages here and there. Preaching became less expositional more topical in nature. Leo the Great's sermons were "brief, simple, and clear" and reflected a reliance on a liturgical calendar.<sup>[2]</sup> His homilies focused more on the themes of the liturgical calendar than expounded a passage of Scripture. Following this trajectory into the Middle Ages, it was increasingly common for the disappearance of even a simple sermon from the corporate worship of God. There were, of course, exceptions to this. But preaching had largely moved to the periphery of worship as the Mass moved to the center. A largely incomprehensible liturgy in Latin focused on the Mass became the sum-total of regular worship in the Church in the Middle Ages. Whether the Word was preached had become irrelevant to worship.

The formal principle of the Reformation called for a return to the Scriptures as the highest and primary authority in the Church. The Reformation made a strong statement that the preaching and reading of the Word is the central and highest point of our worship of God. Mark Earney catalogs some of the Reformers' work in reforming the worship of the Church. Luther in the *German Mass* wrote that "the preaching and teaching of God's Word is

the greatest and noblest part of any service.” He would comment that “unless the word is preached publicly, it slips away. The more it is preached, the more firmly it is retained.”[3] The *Danish Church Order* said that preaching is “the very ministry of the Spirit and of our salvation, in which preachers properly represent Christ.” John à Lasco, the Polish Reformer, argued that sermons must exposit the Scriptures and not simply tell tales or push human traditions. Zwingli, Calvin, Bullinger, and Bucer all advocated for a return to *lectio continua* in the preaching of God’s Word. Calvin famously returned to the pulpit in Geneva after his exile by picking up with the very next passage of Scripture from where he left off three years before.[4]

Matthew Barrett notes this return of preaching to the center of Christian worship was most visible in the furniture of the church.

Upon walking into a sanctuary, one could immediately tell the difference between a church still in the clutches of Rome and a church under the influence of the Reformation program. For Rome, the service revolved around the altar, but for the Reformers, the pulpit was given the position of priority. For Rome, the Latin Mass was the central event, but for the Reformers, it was the Word of the living God preached and proclaimed in the vernacular for the salvation and edification of the saints.[5]

Barrett then quotes historian Scott Manetch’s summary, “The general pattern still holds true: for Catholics, the primary role of the clergy remained sacramental and liturgical; for the Protestant reformers, it was to preach the Word of God.”[6] The central and highest point of Christian worship that is regulated by the Word of God is the preaching of God’s Word.

Worship that is reformed according to the Scriptures places the preaching of God’s Word at the center of worship. And yet in some Reformed and evangelical churches there is a new move away from the preaching of the Word as the central and highest point in worship. The experience of music or the community of small groups has become in many evangelical churches the mainstay and center of worship. The general word “worship” has become synonymous with the particular element of music. The “Worship Leader” in many churches is a position for the lead musician, as if music is the sum-total of worship. When people describe the quality of worship, they tend to refer to the emotions they felt during the music. The sermon is a multimedia talk presented between sets of music. Music fills the primary space of worship and becomes what is identified as worship, *qua* worship.

In the same vein, some evangelical churches have moved away from the preached Word as the center and high point of worship in favor of small group fellowships. Small groups are touted as the place where real discipleship or the real ministry of the church happens. What happens in the gathered corporate worship of the church just supplements what happens in the small group interaction.

Great music that moves the emotions and small groups that foster fellowship are good, in and of themselves. But it must be acknowledged that when these take a higher priority than the preached Word, the church has moved away from the historic and biblical emphasis of worship. Albert Mohler comments, “Worship is not something we do before we settle down for the word of God, it is the act through which the people of God direct all their attentiveness to hearing the one true and living God speak to his people and receive their praises.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Still other Reformed and evangelical churches have ridden a pendulum swing back toward a Romish view of the Table as the high point of worship. Perhaps in an effort to recapture some sense of the beauty of a historic liturgy, a desire to affirm the catholicity of the Church, or even a belief that Scripture commands it, they have sought to elevate the Table to greater prominence in the church. This is misguided. Those who have elevated the Table in worship have taken this instruction of BCO 58-1 seriously. When they make it the high point of worship, however, they have abandoned the historic and biblical emphasis of Reformed worship. They have regressed the form of worship to a medieval and unbiblical standard. Sadly, the end result of this will not be worship that is God-honoring and faithful to His Word. It will turn the Table into formalism, sentimentalism, or possibly even heresy. This is what has historically happened, and we’d be foolish to think it will not happen again. The Table prioritized over the preaching of the Word will distort the congregation’s understanding of both the Table and the Word. This misplaced emphasis is dangerous for the health of the church.

Worship is written into the very fabric of our being. We are meant to glorify God in worship. And God has provided his Word for this purpose. Our singing should be informed by the Word. Our prayers should be shaped by the Word. Our fellowship should be bound by the Word. Our observance of the sacraments should visibly display the Word. And the high point of our worship is sitting under the Word of God preached.

<sup>[1]</sup>Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta: Knox, 1984), 2.

<sup>[2]</sup>Old, 66–68.

<sup>[3]</sup>Quoted in Matthew Barrett and Michael Scott Horton, *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary*, 2017, 56.

<sup>[4]</sup>Earney, Mark. “*Soli Deo Gloria*, The Reformation of Worship.” *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present*. Ed. Jonathan Gibson, Ed. Mark Earney. Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018, 30–32.

<sup>[5]</sup>Barrett and Horton, *Reformation Theology*, 48.

<sup>[6]</sup>Barrett and Horton, 49.

[7] James Montgomery Boice et al., *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2003), 121.



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