

WORSHIP: THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON “PURPOSE” AND “TASK”

God has made all creatures for his glory. Without knowing it, the lilies of the field in their beauty glorify God with a glory greater than that of Solomon, the sparrow on the housetop glorifies God, and the universe in its vastness and remoteness is the theater of God’s glory. But God made men and women in his own image to be the priests of creation and to express on behalf of all creatures the praises of God, so that through human lips the heavens might declare the glory of God. When we, who know we are God’s creatures, worship God together, we gather up the worship of all creation. Our chief end is to glorify God, and creation realizes its own creaturely glory in glorifying God through human lips.¹

Introduction

In a November, 2002, address to the Tennessee Baptist Convention, former President Kevin Shrum suggested that worship should not be the primary focus of a congregation. “If God wanted worship to be the main priority of the church,” Shrum said, “he would take us on to heaven right after we were saved where we could worship Him perfectly. Satan has used it to divide us. My friends, we’ve got to stop worshipping the worship. While worship is necessary, the essential purposes of the church are evangelism and missions.”²

Shrum’s presumably pastoral concern is understandable, but his comments do not reflect a thoroughly biblical theology of worship, to say nothing of the witness of church history. Of course we must not worship our worship, but neither should we worship, say, our programs, and we must not worship our work – something easy to do when the work is godly. Modernity was nearly successful in fixing in our minds the self-oriented and potentially idolatrous notion that work or programs are our

highest priorities. At church, electric lights and boilers and restrooms are *necessary*.

Worship is *essential*. Why? As Robert Webber puts it, the source of the church's spirituality, its power, comes in part from its encounter with God in worship.

Discipleship and missions, among other tasks, are the fruits of that spirituality.

Worship, Webber says, is the "primary celebration" of the church.³

Why is worship the church's purpose? The answer begins with this foundational truth: *Because we were born to worship*. It is our reason for being. We must worship; we will worship something.⁴ We worship because that is how we were created. A. W. Tozer:

One of the greatest tragedies that we find, even in this most enlightened of all ages, is the utter failure of millions of men and women ever to discover why they were born.

Deny it if you will – and some persons will – but wherever there are humans in the world, there are people who are suffering from a hopeless and depressing kind of amnesia. It forces them to cry out, either silently within themselves or often with audible frustration, "I don't even know why I was born!"

...Our first parents in the human race [were] the man named Adam and woman named Eve. Adam had a great fall and he received a terrible bump; involved with him in the catastrophe was Eve, his wife. Then, when they tried to shake the fog out of their minds, looking at each other, they realized that they no longer knew who they were, and they did not know why they were alive. They did not know the purpose for their existence.

Ever since that time, men and women alienated from God and trying to exist on a sick, fallen planet have been pleading, "I don't even know why I was born."

Those who have followed the revelation provided by the Creator God have accepted that God never does anything without purpose. We do believe, therefore, that God had a noble purpose in mind when He created us. We believe that it was distinctly the will of God that men and women created in His image would desire fellowship with Him above all else. In His plan, it was to be a perfect fellowship based on adoring worship of the Creator and Sustainer of all things.

...I am going to say something to you which will sound strange. It even sounds strange to me as I say it, because we are not used to hearing it within our Christian fellowships. *We are saved to worship God*. All that Christ has done for us in the past and all that He is doing now leads to this one end.⁵

Worship must be the church's singular purpose, not only because it is our "chief end", and not only because it reminds us why we exist, but because it is the very thing that we will continue to do for all time. Worship will never end. The important tasks of the church, though, are temporary. They will someday come to an end. This, then, is the reason we must go about them with God-glorifying, Christ-centered, and Spirit-powered enthusiasm. Our response to the world around us – the world that God created – is a response to our worship of him. He is the Creator; we are the created. It *must* begin with him.

Worship is our created purpose, it is our present vocation, and it will continue for all time: Theologian Stanley Grenz has tied these ideas together by noting that Hughes Oliphant Old begins his own study of Reformed worship by declaring, "We worship God because God created us to worship him."⁶ Grenz continues by noting that Wayne Grudem

takes the matter a step further [in his systematic theology], seeing worship as an aspect of our human vocation. In his estimation, worship is "a *direct* expression of our ultimate purpose for living,' which, citing biblical texts such as Ephesians 1:12 (but also reminiscent of the Westminster Catechism), he describes as "to glorify God and fully to enjoy him forever." Rather than limiting the concept to humans, Evelyn Underhill extends the worshiping vocation to encompass all creation.⁷

Grenz then summarizes:

When Christian worship flows out of a keen sense of our eternal future within the divine life in the new creation, it becomes much more than merely our obedience to dominical command. Instead, it comes to entail a joyful celebration of, and even an anticipatory participation in, a worship dynamic that will continue throughout eternity. In short, it becomes a celebration of eternity. No wonder Karl Barth exclaimed, "Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life."⁸

It is ironic that in a day when renewal in many places is resulting in worship that is less word dominated, there should be a call, at least from one former

denominational convention president and pastor, to de-emphasize worship. Frankly, this may be more at the root of the problem than some might want to admit. Many pastors and worship leaders talk entirely too much in worship, revealing by their many words an embedded, tacit belief that the symbols and ministries of worship have little or no power to speak for themselves.⁹ The spoken word is not the centerpiece of worship. The Word made flesh is the centerpiece of worship. The idea of the church having less to do with purpose and more to do with tasks is akin to a bride ignoring her groom because she is too focused upon writing wedding invitations, or a fire wanting to de-emphasize spark and fuel so that it can emphasize warmth and light.

The problem is not that too much attention has been paid to worship, but that it has not been given enough of the right kind of attention. Some have neglected biblical worship. Some have failed to evangelize in their daily lives and in so doing have wrongly made worship the most important place where they expect evangelization to take place. Many talk about the great importance of Scripture, but have neglected its meaningful, creative use in worship.¹⁰ The same may be said of prayer. How sadly ironic that in neglecting worship, some have also neglected the Lord's table, perhaps the single most powerful place and time in worship where we experience God – one of the most important places from where God, through the presence of Christ and in the power of the Spirit, empowers us to go and do the important tasks of the church.¹¹ As we shall see, some have jumped straight away to the *responses* to worship – the commissioning tasks – without first lingering to fulfill their purpose and experience the *revelation* of worship.

The Purpose/Task Dynamic

Etymologies and Definitions

We will be intentional about the words chosen in this present exercise, particularly because of our precarious times, poised as we are in the transitional period between the word-dominated modern world and the word-suspicious postmodern one. Many of us, by virtue of our age, training, and education, are products of the modern era. We hold that words are important and that it is necessary to choose them with care when we talk about matters of theology.

The postmodern argument that there is little meaning between language and reality is an extension of the argument that René Descartes began in the 1600's when he questioned the relationship between thoughts and words. Descartes, along with others, began the dismantling of realism when he questioned how thoughts could be related to objects; postmodern thinkers, it would seem, are attempting to complete the task. As author Chuck Smith, Jr., has written, "In postmodernity the relationship between words (as symbols or 'signifiers') and reality (the 'signified') has become so strained that postmodernists despair over ever coming to know the real world through signs (words, texts, art, or any other representation). This means they have given up any hope of ever knowing reality."¹²

Though the history of our faith is indeed a history of many important words, texts, and art, believers must not despair, for there is opportunity as well as crisis in the postmodernity's difficulties with language and symbol. For example, while the postmodernist might not attach the same kind of importance as we do to *words* about the truths of God, he or she will perhaps be more open to the *story* of God's saving acts and

deeds throughout history. Perhaps one challenge in this exercise, then, is to find and use precise words that make sense to the modern mind that will also leave room for the spiritual imagination of the postmodern one to operate.

*The First Word of the Purpose/Task Dynamic*¹³

pur·pose

Pronunciation: 'p&r-p&s

Function: *noun*

Etymology: Middle English *purpos*, from Old French, from *purposer* to purpose, from Latin *proponere* (perfect indicative *proposui*) to propose

: something set up as an object or end to be attained

The Latin etymology of word “purpose”, a noun, points to the meaning “to propose”.

We might think of the words “to propose” in terms of suggesting something, or an invitation to talk. But another meaning of “to propose,” making an offer of marriage – that is, the prospect of forming a marriage relationship – is especially intriguing. Leonard Sweet writes about the language of truth, symbols, the marriage relationship, and the

Bible:

Truth resides in relationships, not documents or principles. The Gospels don’t teach us about Jesus as principle but Jesus as person. The power of a logo is that it transmutes image into identity, creating the very thing it symbolizes. In Jesus, the logos and the logo became one.

Not until the fourteenth century (at the earliest) did truth become imbedded in propositions and positions. The shift from “troth” to “truth” was the shift from truth residing in relationships to truth being found in documents and evidence... When “truth” could not be understood apart from the network of relationships connecting people to one another; when “truth” had no independent status outside of obligations to God and to others: the biblical admonitions of “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32), and “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13), had a very different ring to them. The quaint “plight thee my troth” language [of the traditional wedding vows] beckons us back to a biblical drama where Truth was embodied in a person, where Truth resided in a relationship with the very image and incarnation of God.

Someday I will hold up my Bible before a congregation, shake it, and yell at the top of my lungs, “This is not a book primarily about propositions and programs and

principals. This is a book about relationships. This is a primer in connectedness. This is a book about you and God’s love for you in God’s only begotten Son.” Or in the words of Hugh Ross Mackintosh, “When once the Gospel has been severed from a historic person, and identified with a complex of metaphysical ideas, what it ought to be called is scarcely worth discussion; that it is no longer Christianity, is clear.”

Jesus himself is the Truth.

Jesus himself is the Kingdom.

Jesus himself is the Life.

Before God and all witnesses, I plight my “troth” to Jesus the Christ.¹⁴

The definition of “purpose”, like its etymology, seems especially appropriate for this present article: “Something set up as an object or an end to be attained.” Worship, surely, is this. While the only perfect worship takes places continuously in heaven, even so our corporate worship here on earth shares the same object or end to be attained: lifting up Christ. Each week as we worship together with our local part of the body of Christ, we are caught up with and join, however briefly, that ceaseless joy that is eternal, heavenly worship. Surely this, as Grenz reminds us, is the delight of the church – her *passion* in the here and now – as it will be in the ages to come. Worship abides forever and our relationship, our troth, to the Groom is likewise eternal.

The Second Word of the Purpose/Task Dynamic

task

Pronunciation: 'task

Function: *noun*

Etymology: Middle English *taske*, from Old North French *tasque*, from Medieval Latin *tasca* tax or service imposed by a feudal superior, from *taxare* to tax

: a usually assigned piece of work often to be finished within a certain time

Like the origins of the word “purpose,” the etymology of the word “task” beautifully harmonizes with the idea of worship and the church. The Medieval Latin meaning of the word paints the picture of a service imposed by a feudal superior. Space will not permit a more complete discussion of the importance of covenantal agreements and relationships,

but having a basic understanding of its close connection to the worship of God, right from the time of Abraham, is a central component in a biblical theology of worship. God is our great King, we are his subjects, and part of our sworn duty is to bring him our honor and tributes. Then, at his command, we go throughout his territory – the world around us – to be his covenant representatives.¹⁵

The definition of the term “task” seems precisely right as well: “a usually assigned piece of work often to be finished within a certain time.” As we have already said, the tasks of the church are the “marching orders” of our Sovereign King, temporarily necessary until the Consummation.

The Third Word of the Purpose/Task Dynamic

dy·nam·ic

Pronunciation: dī-'na-mik

Function: *adjective, noun*

Etymology: French *dynamique*, from Greek *dynamikos* powerful, from *dynamis* power, from *dynasthai* to be able

: marked by usually continuous and productive activity or change

: a driving or energizing force

Perhaps many of us would prefer simple models and straightforward plans that show how the church and her component parts should work. Indeed, there are many models of the church that purport to represent the appropriate relationship between her many activities and functions. But diagrams and flowcharts are limited in their ability to communicate something as alive and active as the relationship of the church’s purpose to her tasks. Perhaps moving the model from the printed page to the spiritual imagination would help remove some of the limitations that two-dimensional representations impose. Let us then think of the “purpose/task” idea not so much as a plan on paper, but imagine it as an active, living force: a dynamic.

The word “dynamic,” the term I have chosen to represent the relationship between “purpose” and “task,” is a word of action whose roots are found in the Greek meanings “to be able” or “powerful.” Its definitions, too, contain words of action and, also appropriate for the present context, contain the notion of continual activity. The relation between worship and witness, between purpose and task, is surely (or certainly should be) a driving or energizing force that is ongoing and productive. It is indeed a drive, as the definition indicates, whose energy is derived from the interplay between its two internal parts.

Avoiding a Modern Obstacle – Embracing the Gesture of Scripture

It would seem that describing and using the purpose/task dynamic helps us get past a decidedly modern stumbling block: namely that there must be a linear or two-dimensional order to our thinking about how worship and other activities in the church relate to one another. In other words, it bypasses the whole argument that one function of the church is more or less important than another. Modern thinking leads to the assumption that if something comes first it must best. That which follows, then, must be somehow inferior. Because worship, both corporate and personal, is ongoing, and because walking in our baptism means daily dying to self and rebirth to life in Christ, worship is not a starting point on a chronological timeline before which there is nothing. Worship is the formative purpose of our lives, an end to be obtained, though never completely or perfectly this side of heaven. The tasks, then, are the assigned pieces of work that result from our encounters with God in worship.

Additionally, there is an interrelation at work in the dynamic wherein purpose and task cooperate. Robert Webber, using the term “mission” to describe the task of

evangelism, writes about this interrelation in *Ancient-Future Evangelism*: “The two [worship and evangelism] go hand in hand. God’s mission is proclaimed and enacted in the worship of God’s earthly community, the church, which embodies God’s mission.”¹⁶

Another helpful aspect of the purpose/task dynamic is that it is compatible with and complimentary to the rhythmic pattern, the gesture or movement, seen in examples of biblical worship. It is to the idea of an inherent gesture in biblical worship, the very place we see the purpose/task dynamic come to life, that we next turn our attention.

The Gesture of Worship

While there has been a purposeful avoidance of a linear construction of the “purpose/task” dynamic, a kind of linear movement may indeed be found in the specific places in Scripture where we see the dynamic at work: theophanic encounters. A close examination of these exchanges shows that divine/human encounters begin with God and end with human action. God initiates the encounter; humans react. He gives a word; humans respond. Theological reflection on the “purpose/task” dynamic suggested here will be grounded in four specific theophanies.

Russell Mittman has beautifully written about the unique shape of Scripture, especially seen in places where God meets humankind. Because these encounters have a kind of form and even movement, Mittman suggests, our worship – the place where God meets with us – should be similarly formed and ordered. Mittman goes on to identify a “five-fold” pattern of biblical worship: Gathering, Penitence, Word, Offertory/Eucharist, and Sending or Dismissal.¹⁷ Robert Webber’s “four-fold” pattern of Gathering, Word, Table, and Dismissal is nearly the same. One difference is that the second of Mittman’s “folds,” Penitence, or at least the idea of awareness and acknowledgment of a

“discontinuity between the divine and the human” (Mittman’s description), takes place in the context of Webber’s Gathering. Dr. Constance Cherry has taken both approaches and remarked that the biblical patterns may be seen through the simpler lens of “revelation and response” and has suggested that the elements of worship be ordered accordingly.¹⁸ This is particularly useful when applying the principle to congregations or denominational contexts that do not celebrate the table each time they gather.

The present article draws from the two former approaches, but most especially from the latter given that three of the four Scripture passages I will examine do not include references to the table per se. Another variation is that instead of Mittman’s notion of worship as having a shape, the term I prefer is “gesture”, especially because it evokes the image of intentional and purposeful direction along with the movement.

God Meets With Moses at the Burning Bush: Exodus 3:1-12

¹Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

⁴When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

⁵“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

¹²And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”¹⁹

The gesture, the movement, in this worship experience is self evident and its tempo seems to quicken as the encounter progresses: Moses, out minding his own business, as it were, on the back side of the desert is startled by a curious oddity and alters his immediate course and plans to “see this strange sight.” God has appointed that there be a divine meeting with this son-in-law of Jethro. With Moses’ drawing near, God calls out and Moses responds. Again, God speaks, this time revealing something about the nature of the very place where the encounter occurs: It is holy because of its proximity to God. Moses responds in light of the “discontinuity.” Next, beginning in verse 7 and following, we see God give a word – he lays out a commission that will require a response. Of course, the first response is not the one we might have hoped Moses would make. Yet, ultimately, after God and his very human agent dialogue and interact in the context of a worship experience, Moses becomes a changed person on a mission. Revelation, response, revelation, response: the rhythmic gesture of worship is so ordered. It begins with God and ends with human action.²⁰

God Meets With Isaiah in a Vision of Temple Worship: Isaiah 6:1-9

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

⁵“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

⁹He said, “Go and tell this people:

“‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’”

Again, the gesture of worship in this theophany is clear and begins, not unlike the scene at Mount Horeb, with the human not particularly expecting an encounter with God. The imagery of worship saturates the vision: a robe, the temple, winged seraphs, responsorial singing, and smoke. Isaiah’s reaction to the Divine is immediate. The word from the Lord follows. Isaiah then responds and becomes a changed person on a mission. Revelation, response, revelation, response: the rhythmic gesture of worship is so ordered. It begins with God and ends with human action.

Jesus Meets With Two Disciples on the Road to Emmaus: Luke 24:13-35

¹³Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶but they were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

¹⁹“What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²²In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb

early this morning ²³but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

²⁵He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

²⁸As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³²They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

³³They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." ³⁵Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

Two disciples, unaware of the impending encounter with the divine, are walking along together. Jesus comes to them and initiates the exchange. Because "they were kept from recognizing him," the travelers' reaction to the divine, their "discontinuity," is delayed. Next, in what must be the most remarkable Bible study recorded, Jesus "explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." The disciples' response is seen in their strong desire to linger with Jesus and have him remain with them into the evening. Revelation at table comes next in the encounter and, as Jesus himself gives thanks, breaks bread, and serves them, their eyes are opened. The disciples respond at once.

Revelation, response, revelation, response: the rhythmic gesture of worship is so ordered. It begins with God and ends with human action.

Jesus Meets With the Disciples on the Mount of Olives:
Matthew 27:16-20; Luke 24:50-53

¹⁶Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

⁵⁰When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵²Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

This remarkable theophanic encounter, as much or more as the others, features the rhythmic gesture of worship, especially considering Luke’s detail of what amounts to a blessing, or dismissal, by Christ to the disciples as he sends them on their way.

Like the other theophanies examined, the encounter is set into motion by the Divine and begins with revelation: Jesus tells the disciples where to go and meet him. They then worship him (though, as in the Moses encounter, there seems to be a lack of initial trust, at least with some of those gathered). Jesus gives a word and a promise (again, elements similar to Exodus 3). The disciples respond by worshipping again, and going “forth into the world to love and serve the Lord” with great joy, to borrow a phrase from the ancient dismissal litany.

Revelation, response, revelation, response: the rhythmic gesture of worship is thus ordered. It begins with God and ends with human action.

Conclusions and Observations: “Delight is Higher Tribute Than Duty”

In the book *A Voice in the Wilderness: Clear Preaching in a Complicated World*, Haddon Robinson reminds us how important it is to accurately appreciate the entire context of a passage before developing a sermon from that text:

Approaching a text with the attitude *How am I going to get a sermon out of this?* pollutes the process. We can end up manipulating the text for the purposes of an outline instead of first trying to observe, interpret, and appreciate the text.

For one message based on the story of Christ calming the storm, I began my study assuming my sermon’s main idea would be that we can count on Christ to calm the wind and waves in our lives. But as I studied the text, I realized I couldn’t promise people they would never sink just because Christ was with them in the storms of life.

This passage has to be seen in its broader context. Jesus has called the disciples and told them about the nature of his kingdom: it will start small but spread wide. In that early stage, everything depended on the men in that boat — Jesus and the disciples. If they go under, the kingdom is gone. The point of the passage is that those who have committed everything to Christ’s cause can know that the kingdom will ultimately triumph because of the power of the King. This is an eternal truth that shifts the emphasis from the personal storms in my life and whether I will sink to the eternal kingdom that will never fail.

If I promised that Christ would calm every storm, I would have twisted the text to say what I wanted. Instead I preached what the text taught me.²¹

Perhaps a similar thing happens when we remove the Great Commission from the context of worship around it, when we focus on “task” apart from “purpose”: we lose an opportunity to see a larger picture of the Kingdom and the power of our Sovereign. Scripture shows that the rhythm of revelation and response orders our encounters with God. He beckons us that we should meet with him. We respond to his holiness. He gives us a word, gives us tasks to perform. We go forth with joy into the world to serve him. Moses’ going to Egypt resulted from his worship encounter with God. Isaiah’s response to the commissioning was fueled by his worship of God. The Emmaus road disciples were not driven to “return at once” to Jerusalem until after their divine appointment and experience at table with the risen Christ. And the events around the

Great Commission are, like the other theophanic encounters we examined, ordered by the rhythm, the gesture, of worship.

If worship is not the purpose of the church, then church members might very well be going about the tasks in their own strength - under their own power – even if the desire to accomplish the tasks is rightly motivated. In the end, for us to go about the important tasks of the church, even missions, in our own strength is still all about us. How can we jump straight away to the responses of worship without lingering to fulfill our purpose and experience the revelation of worship? How can we possibly go about the tasks Christ mandates if we do not first respond to his invitation to draw near, and then have him strengthen, bless, and send? These things happen in worship. Worship is where we recite the wondrous, saving acts and deeds of our Sovereign King, so if we fail to worship, we might possibly begin to lose a sense of the complete otherness and power of the God we serve. Ultimately, no one wants to go about doing tasks for a small god.

There is a broader truth, a broader context, that each of these theophanic encounters reveals, and it is a truth that shifts the emphasis from the *personal* dimension of the exchanges, that is the human responses, to the *eternal* nature of the Kingdom: Worship is ultimate because it is God's purpose for his creation. Everything else that we do comes about because of our purpose. Pastor, missionary, and theologian John Piper would agree:

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.

Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal in missions. It's the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory....

But worship is also the fuel of missions. Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can't commend what you don't cherish....

The ultimate goal of God in all of history is to uphold and display his glory for the enjoyment of the redeemed from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. His goal is the gladness of his people because God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. Delight is higher tribute than duty.²²

The premise of this article is that the single purpose of the church is worship. Her important tasks, alternately, are several, and include discipleship and evangelism. To suggest, for example, that missions is the purpose of the church seems like the right evangelical perspective, but, in the end, is a narrower slice of the larger, biblical view. I have attempted to make the case for the construction of a “purpose/task dynamic,” or lens, through which may be seen a broader, more complete biblical theology of the relationship of worship to the church. The difference, indeed, is one of perspective, but may also be the difference between a challenging plot of land, and a vast, breathtaking landscape.

The tendency to focus on task apart from purpose is understandable and natural. Our “task” is a challenge, but it may also strike us as manageable: With even a little vision we can see the patch of ground before us and pull up our sleeves and get to work. This is an enterprise we can understand, a project we can accomplish. We will clear the ground, tear out the brambles, remove the rocks, and till the soil. We will sow seeds and cultivate the growing plants and pray for a great harvest. We will sing about our work while we are working and we will work knowing that God is indeed pleased with this kind of work. It is our duty.

Yet I appeal for us to widen our perspective, to lift our gaze, and see the plot of land in the larger context of the awe-inspiring panorama beyond it. This kind of viewing takes more vision. Our “purpose” is much, much bigger and stretches out far beyond the

familiar territory around us and exceeds our ability to fully see. It is a boundless vista, an endless, untamable country. We will never find its limits and its exploration is our birthright.

Soli Dei gloria.

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 ENDNOTES

¹ James B. Torrence, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 13.

² Connie Davis, “President’s Address: Shrum Calls for Focus on Church-Formed Ministries” in *The Baptist and Reflector*, 20 November 2002, 12.

³ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 32, 38.

⁴ David McCullough has said very much the same thing: “The need for worship has been built within the nature of our humanity. Even as cars need gasoline to run, and sailboats need wind to sail, and hawks need thermals to soar, and fish need water to swim—even so, we need worship to live. We *must* worship; we *will* worship.” See his *The Trivialization of God* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1995), 106.

⁵ A.W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship? A Call to True Worship* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1985), 49, 94.

⁶ Huges Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*, revised ed (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 1.

⁷ Stanley Grenz, “Celebrating Eternity: Christian Worship as a Foretaste of Participation in the Triune God” in *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Stanley E. Porter (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003), 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹ Theologian Ted Peters has written extensively about the subject of worship symbols in his systematic theology, *God: The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era* (Augsburg Fortress, 2000). For Peters, Christian worship cannot be separated from, or even adequately explicated apart from, its symbols.

¹⁰ Ironically, sometimes denominations holding that the Bible is especially foundational to their faith and practice often worship in corporate settings that use very little Scripture. That which is used is often a single, short excerpt read by the pastor. One wonders if some leaders, by virtue of their actions in worship, are sending the message that their words about Scripture are more important than the words of Scripture themselves. Dr. Constance Cherry has written on this topic in a yet unpublished article that reports the results of several months of on-site research she conducted while attending worship services at a large number and variety of denominations. Her research reveals, for example, that many evangelical churches spend more time on announcements in worship than on the reading of Scripture or on prayer.

¹¹ See Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000). Nouwen makes the theological case that the desire to go and makes disciples is the most appropriate response to the Eucharist in corporate worship and the daily, eucharistic life of the disciple.

¹² Chuck Smith, Jr., *The End of the World... As We Know It* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2001), 54.

¹³ Word definitions and etymologies have been taken from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary and Thesaurus. Available at: <http://www.m-w.com/>.

¹⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 131.

¹⁵ For a discussion on covenant structure in Scripture and its important connection to worship, see Richard Leonard's article, "The Concept of Covenant in Biblical Worship" in *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship, Vol. 1, The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 56.

¹⁶ See Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*.

¹⁷ F. Russell Mittman, *Worship in the Shape of Scripture* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

¹⁸ This concept is one that Dr. Cherry teaches at the Institute for Worship Studies, Florida Campus, as well as her numerous worship workshops and speaking engagements.

¹⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural references are taken from the Holy Bible New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

²⁰ Stanley Grenz would say that worship begins *and* ends with God. His interpretation is that revelation opens and closes the event: God's invitation comes first; His sending forth comes last. Our final response to go and serve is the end result of the worship encounter.

²¹ Steve Brown, Haddon Robinson, and William Willimon, *A Voice in the Wilderness: Clear Preaching in a Complicated World (Mastering Ministry's Pressure Point)*. (Sister, OR: Multnomah, 1993).

²² John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 11, 219.