

# ♪ Worship Notes ♪

Volume 3, Number 3 ♪ March 2008

**THEME: Called to Worship**

## Giving God the First Word

Robert Nordling of the Calvin Institute of Worship once told the story of taking his five-year-old son Jackson to a young friend's birthday party. Jackson is all dressed up and brimming with excitement and enthusiasm as he rushes into his friends' house to join in the festivities. However, when his father comes to pick him up after the party, Jackson comes out looking dejected and depressed. His father asks, "Jackson, what's the matter? Didn't you enjoy the party?" Jackson responds with a terse, "No." So his father asks, "But you were looking forward to this party so much! Why didn't you have fun?" And Jackson answers, "I didn't get any presents!!" To which Dad can only reply, "But Jackson, it wasn't *your* party!"

The lesson Nordling draws from this real-life parable is all too apparent and convicting. The worship service is, so to speak, *God's party*, not ours. And we come primarily, not to *receive* (though we certainly do that also), but to *give* to God the presents of our faith, our gratitude, our praises, our confessions, the commitments of our hearts.

So how do we look at our gathering for worship? Who's in the driver's seat? Whose party is it anyway? And how should that affect how we approach worship, and how we begin worship?

Worship is indeed God's "party." He is simultaneously the Inviter, the Host, and the Guest of Honor. Coming to God in worship is God's idea, after all, not ours.

In fact, we need to recognize that *all* of our movement toward God occurs because God acts first. After all, it is God

- who created us;
- who made us with the ability to respond to Him as creatures to their Creator.
- who has revealed Himself to us through the pages of Scripture, through creation, and through his Son, Jesus Christ.
- who has given us salvation

through Christ and drawn us into relationship with Himself.

### God initiates

God always initiates; we can only respond. And our primary response is worship. In worship we respond in praise to our God for the glory and greatness that He has revealed to us; we respond in thanksgiving to our God for the saving grace that He has lavished upon us; we respond in wonder and delight to our God for the relationship that He has initiated with us.

God is the host of our gathering, the subject and the object of our worship. God Himself is the main event.

Even our response to God depends not on our own strength but on the Holy Spirit working in us. “Are you so foolish?” Paul asks the Galatian believers. “After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort?” (Gal. 3:3). The obvious answer to Paul’s rhetorical question is, Of course not! We are saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and there is no way that we are then going to be perfected through our own effort! (Paul indicates that it would be “foolish” for the Galatians to even entertain that thought!) As believers are in continual need of the Spirit’s help to grow in righteousness and, indeed, to do anything that is truly pleasing to God . . . including worship him.

### God invites

Our worship is an obedient response to God’s invitation. We may invoke God to bless our worship and to make his presence known. But in a greater sense we cannot invite God to be present in our worship; He never left—we did! Rather it is God who invites *us* to worship. It is his Word which tells us to “Come, let us worship and bow down. . . .” God has revealed himself to us and has established a relationship with us by his power and grace. God delights in that relationship and desires (and deserves) our worship as a means of affirming and strengthening our relationship with him. “Worship the Lord with gladness,” says the psalmist, “come before Him with joyful songs” (Ps. 100:2). Coming to God is not an option for Christians but rather our obedient response to God’s gracious invitation.

The work of Christ has opened the way for us into God’s presence, as the book of Hebrews makes clear (Heb. 4:16; 7:19, 25). 10:19-22 exhort us to take full advantage of that free access to the Father which Christ

has made available: by all means, the writer urges us, “Let us draw near” with confidence, assurance and faith. Our living High Priest has not only made the way clear through his blood (10:19-20), but indeed actively leads us (10:21) into fellowship with God.

### Hearing again God’s call to worship

Those truths have profound implications for how we “come to God in worship.” Many worship services begin with either some innocuous words of greeting by the worship leader—focused on the weather or on the size of the crowd or on the pleasure the leader has in seeing the people gathered—or else the service launches right into songs written about or to God.

But the question is, who deserves the first word in worship? And that takes us back to question of whose gathering it is. The fact is, we have been invited by God himself into his holy presence. He has taken the initiative for that access to be possible through the work of his Son. God is the host of this gathering, the subject and the

object of our worship. God is the main event, our purpose for gathering.

God doesn’t “show up,” at worship, as the popular catchphrase goes. Although the phrase is obviously intended to communicate a vivid sense of fellowship with God, let’s be careful about suggesting both that God was somewhere else, and that we did something to bring Him close! As Steve Fry puts it:

I’m concerned that some of us have perceived worship as a spiritual talisman we employ to get God to show up, rather than seeing worship as a simple response to His grace. . . . If we perceive worship as a mechanism that triggers His presence, we’ll inadvertently focus on the act of worship it

Are we  
seeking after  
God’s  
*presents,*  
or God’s  
*presence?*

self instead of the One we are worshipping—worshipping worship if you will.

“Unity, Worship, and the Presence of God,”  
*Discipleship Journal* [Nov./Dec. 2002])

Since God is the Inviter, the Host, and the Guest of Honor, shouldn't we hear first from him? Isn't it infinitely appropriate to hear a Word of invitation and welcome and testimony from God himself as the one who has made our gathering both possible and meaningful? Let us hear first from God through his Word, and *then* respond to Him with our songs, prayers, and words of praise.

### A biblical pattern

In this way our worship will reflect the biblical pattern of all God's dealings with humanity. This pattern, seen throughout Scripture, can be represented thus:



(See an extended development of this theme in [Worship Notes 1.5, May 2006](#).) God always takes the first step to reveal Himself and to initiate a relationship with his creatures; our part is always that of responding to his first move. In our worship, it is ultimately true that, until God first speaks to us, we really have nothing to say to him. We cannot respond appropriately until we have heard something to respond *to*!

And this pattern should not only be reflected at the beginning of the service, but throughout as an alternating rhythm of revelation and response, so that our worship becomes a true dialogue between God and his people. (An interesting exercise is to take an outline of your worship service and put an arrow up or down besides each element to indicate whether in that part of the service God is speaking to us or we are responding to him; horizontal arrows can also indicate

those times when we are speaking to each other for our mutual edification.)

The Word can provide a God-centered, divinely focused means of transitioning between songs or parts of the service. Consider the difference between these two examples of transitions:

- “And now we're going to sing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy.’ Let's all sing out!”

or:

- “In the words of Isaiah 6:3, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory!’” (followed by singing “Holy, Holy, Holy”)

Which is a more powerful lead-in and is more likely to

enhance the flow of worship and the worshipers' concentration?

We need to hear from God more than God needs to hear from us! And while God de-

serves and desires and relishes the praises of his people, how much more fervent and heartfelt those praises will be when they are fueled by God's own self-revelation.

Worship is a dialogue, a conversation between God and his people. What a blessing to be able to express our adoration and praise to him! But oh, how we need to make sure we are listening to God and not doing all of the talking! And let's honor Him and his gracious invitation by letting Him have the first word:

*“that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 15:5-6)*

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## GUEST ARTICLE

# The Call to Worship

Bryan Chapell

(President, Covenant Theological Seminary)

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations. (Psalm 100, NIV)*

These joyful words of the Psalmist that call God's covenant people to worship exemplify the qualities of a call to worship that begins a worship service. In the common practice of Christian churches across many traditions, a call to worship typically is a few lines of Scripture (or a combination of Scripture texts) expressed by a minister or worship leader at the beginning of a church service. The call to worship exhorts God's people to turn from worldly distractions and to focus hearts, minds and actions on revering him. The beloved words of Psalm 100 well demonstrate the principles that for centuries have guided worship leaders in their expression and choice of words for the call to worship:

**1) God calls us to worship.** God's Word exhorts his people, "Shout for joy to the Lord," and "Worship the Lord with gladness." In writing these words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Psalmist is actually speaking for God as he calls the ancient people to worship. The example should remind us that a contemporary worship leader who uses the words of Scripture to call the congregation to worship still speaks in behalf of God. The host of the worship service is divine. We do not invite him to be present. He invites us to, "Come before him" (vs. 2). God calls us from all other preoccupations to join the people he has redeemed in recognition, praise and service of his omnipresent glory.

Because the call to worship is from God, we are reminded that he always initiates; we respond. This is a profound truth not only for our salvation, but also for our worship of the One who saves us. The call to worship is not simply a perfunctory greeting of human cordiality, but is at once a weighty responsibility and a joyful privilege. The worship leader issues God's invitation to join the heavenly throng that already and always praises him. The traditions of each church and occasion will help determine the appropriateness of gathering people from stray thoughts and conversations with informal words of welcome (e.g., "Good morning. How good to have you here in God's house!"), but the privileges and responsibilities of the call to worship that actually commences our focus on revering God are too good to displace with comments regarding the weather and yesterday's football game.

With a scriptural call to worship God invites us by his Word to join the worship of the ages and angels. God does not simply invite us to a party of friends, or a lecture on religion, or a concert of sacred music – he invites us into the presence of the King of the Universe before whom all creation will bow and for whom all heaven now sings. With the call to worship God's people are invited to participate in the wondrous praise that already and eternally enraptures the hosts of heaven. This awesome news and great privilege should be reflected with appropriate enthusiasm and joy by the worship leader in the call to worship. Such a call will typically lead directly into a corporate or choral hymn of praise as God's people respond to the blessings of worship into which they are called. A well-planned call to worship often reflects the theme of the service or the nature the occasion so that the remaining elements of service are a natural outflow of, and response to, the content of the call.

**2) God calls us to respond to his revelation.** By using the words of Scripture as a call to worship, the leader automatically urges God’s people to respond to his disclosure of his own nature and purposes. This pattern established by the call to worship shapes the rest of the worship service. We do not approach God on our terms, but his. When he speaks, it is our obligation and privilege to respond appropriately in praise, prayer, repentance, testimony, encouragement of others, and service to what he declares about himself. This corporate dialogue in which we as God’s people respond to God’s revelation is the sacred rhythm of covenant worship that begins with the call to worship.

God reveals himself in Psalm 100: “Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us...” (vs. 3). This revelation of God as Lord and Creator immediately leads the Psalmist to exhortations for further exaltation: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name” (vs. 4). These words remind us that a call to worship has an imperative quality. We are not simply informing others of the attributes of God or creating a holy aura by the citation of a poignant Scripture passage. In the call to worship, the worship leader specifically calls God’s people to respond to God’s revelation.

Though it may seem obvious, it is often important to remind worship leaders that the text chosen for a call to worship is, in fact, a “call.” In the call to worship the leader exhorts God’s people to respond to the revelation of the divine nature and blessings. Thus, the text should call the people to shout, sing, praise, bow, bless or in some other way express their worship of God. If the text itself does not have this imperative aspect (and virtually all texts chosen as calls to worship in historic liturgies do possess such an imperative), then the worship leader should provide a word or phrase that instructs God’s people how to respond to the text cited. An added phrase as simple as, “In light of what God has told us about his love, let us worship him,” can turn a Scripture that has no “call” quality into an appropriate call to worship.

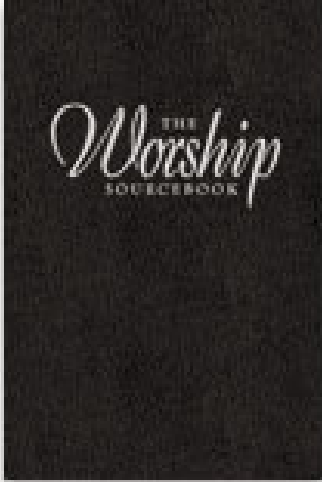
**3) God calls us to respond to his redemption.** Because God invites our praise, we know our worship pleases him – somehow we have been made precious to him. The Psalmist does not merely remind us that God made us, but also “. . . we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture” (vs. 3). As we face our weakness, frailty and sin, it seems impossible that God would be pleased by us—or our praise. Yet, his invitation to worship is itself a revelation of his grace that makes us willing and able to respond to him. In fact, knowledge of God’s redemptive qualities serves as the impetus for the climax of the Psalmist’s call to worship. The Psalmist’s adoration crescendos with these words: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise” (vs. 4); and the reasons follow: “For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations” (vs. 5).

The entire message of the Gospel is not usually verbalized in the call to worship, but its features inevitably glisten. By a scriptural call to worship we understand that God welcomes us to his presence and invites us to participate in his purposes. Though we are weak, he is welcoming; though our iniquities are great, he remains inviting. The call to worship necessarily and simultaneously commends God’s worthiness and consoles us in our unworthiness. We can come to him; he wants us; and, he delights in our praise. All this reminds us that God has established our relationship with him by his grace and—far from releasing us from all holy obligations – that grace now compels our response of worship.

In the call to worship God calls us to give him praise, but the command is not onerous. It is an invitation to respond to God’s revelation of himself and his grace. In offering this invitation God is both host and honoree, and God’s people are both invited and compelled by his mercy to give him glory. God gives us the privilege of welcome into his presence that we might reciprocate with the gift of worship. Right perception of this gift exchange encourages the worship leader to speak the call to worship with the warmth of heart and openness of gesture that such an occasion of mutual blessing deserves.

(Foreward to the book *Calls to Worship: A Pocket Resource* by Robert Vasholz,  
publication date May 1, 2008 by Christian Focus Publishers.  
Used by kind permission of Dr. Chapell.)

## GOD'S WORDS OF GREETING



*The Worship Sourcebook* (a wonderful resource published jointly in 2004 by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Faith Alive Resources, and Baker Books) has a section of scriptural calls to worship which focus on God as the One inviting us to worship (section 1.3, pages 56-59).

These words of explanation are offered:

*The call to worship establishes the unique purpose of the worship service and reinforces the “vertical dimension” of worship—an encounter between God and the gathered congregation. . . . The words of greeting establish the lines of communication in worship. God always comes to us before we come to God. So it is fitting for worship to begin with scriptural words that convey God’s greeting to us (historically referred to in some traditions as the “salutation”). [48,56]*

The following practical suggestions are offered as well [56]:

*The posture and gestures of both leader and worshipers can be very important in helping the congregation experience these words of greeting as the communication of God’s promise. The leader may raise a hand in blessing over the congregation, and the worshipers may extend their hands or bow their heads to receive God’s promises.*

*Any of the following greetings may be introduced with a statement like this:*

“Our Lord has called us to worship and now greets us.”

## QUOTABLES

### *God’s Call to Worship*

“[The call to worship] is usually taken from scripture for two reasons: we are summoned by the Word revealed in scripture, and only words of scripture are appropriate to call us to the worship of Almighty God. In either case the point is the same: We are summoned by God to worship. It is at God’s initiative that we come, not ours.”

(Donald Stake, *The ABCs of Worship*, 33)

“The call to worship is an important part of worship because it means that gathering together is not just a bright idea cooked up by the church leaders. On the contrary, the Lord himself calls us to gather and commands us to assemble in his presence.”

(Peter Leithart, “Transforming Worship” *Foundations* 38 [Spring 1997]:31)

[Romans 12:1] “In addressing his readers as *adelphoi*, (NRSV, ‘brothers and sisters’), Paul makes it clear that his entreaty is for those who know themselves to be the recipients of God’s mercies and who are now united in the community of Christ. This call to worship is thus similar to Old Testament passages like Exodus 19:4-6; 20:1-3; Deuteronomy 10:14-22, where the redemptive initiative of God establishes and dictates the sort of ‘divine service’ that was required of Israel.”

David Peterson, “Worship and Ethics in Romans 12,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44.2 (1993):280

“As one body, in union with Christ and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, we come before God in expectation of dialogue, an actual give-and-take exchange between God and God’s people. Biblical worship flows like a purposeful conversation, during which we speak, but only because we have been spoken to. In a classic form of the dialogue, God issues an invitation, a call to worship: ‘Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing’; and we respond, ‘For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever . . .’ God longs for reconciliation with and among his children, and so we confess our sins and lament their effects. God assures us we have been forgiven in Christ, and we renew our commitment to live faithfully. Before Scripture is read, we call upon the Spirit to illumine our minds and soften our hearts. God speaks, through the ancient text that is opened and the message that is preached. Thanks be to God, we may hear in the message the Word of the Lord. God seals his promises in the cup of salvation and the waters of baptism, tangible gifts by which we taste and see that the Lord is good. We pray—for ourselves, the church, and the world—and we offer our gifts. Having had the first word, God also has the last: a blessing of grace and peace.”

(Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. and Sue A. Rozeboom, *Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking about Christian Worship Today*, 137-8)

“In the call to worship we hear God’s first word to us; in the benediction we hear God’s last word to us; in the Scripture lessons we hear God speaking to our faith-parents; in the sermon we hear that word re-expressed to us; in the hymns, which are all to a greater or lesser extent paraphrases of Scripture, the Word of God makes our prayers articulate.” (Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 55)

“The beautiful part of worship is that it prepares you and enables you to zero in on the important things that must be done for God.

Listen to me! Practically every great deed done in the church of Christ all the way back to the apostle Paul was done by people blazing with the radiant worship of their God.

A survey of church history will prove that it was those who were the yearning worshipers who also became the great workers. Those great saints whose hymns we so tenderly sing were active in their faith to the point that we just wonder how they ever did it all.

The great hospitals have grown out of the hearts of worshipping men. The mental institutions grew out of the hearts of worshipping and compassionate men and women. We should say, too, that wherever the church has come out of her lethargy, rising from her sleep and into the tides of revival and spiritual renewal, always the worshipers were back of it.

We will be making a mistake if we just stand back and say, “But if we give ourselves to worship, no one will do anything.”

On the contrary, if we give ourselves to God’s call to worship, everyone will do more than he or she is doing now. Only, what he or she does will have significance and meaning to it. It will have the quality of eternity in it—it will be gold, silver and precious stones, not wood, hay and stubble.”

(A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* 18-19)

“[In a choral call to worship] the choir steps into the role of the Psalmist and invites the people of God to ‘worship and bow down,’ to ‘kneel before the Lord our Maker’ (Ps. 95:6). At this point the choir is actually extending God’s invitation to His children to come before Him and rejoice. But beware the danger of losing the power of a call to worship by making it too rote and predictable:

sing it sometimes, read it sometimes—singly, corporately, responsively.”  
(Ron Man, [“The Choir as Worship Leader”](#))

“The typical Reformed service begins with a Call to Worship in the words of Holy Scripture. The invitation is from God.”  
(Raymond Abba, *Principles of Christian Worship*, 100)

## PERSONAL NOTE

On Tuesday, February 26, I drove to Jackson, Tennessee about an hour up the Interstate from Memphis in order to teach Lesson 4 for a class taking [Perspectives on the World Christian Movement](#) course at a church there. Jackson, you’ll remember, is where a tornado destroyed half the campus of Union University on February 5, miraculously with no loss of life. (Several Europeans asked me about it on my last trip, having heard about it on international news over there!) One of our son’s high school friends was one of those dug out of the rubble, and has been interviewed in a number of local and national publications.

The church where I taught owns some kind of hotel, and has generously voted to let Union students live there for the rest of the year. The first week of the Perspectives course was the night of the tornado, and there were about 8 students there the night I taught who had not been on campus when the tornado came through because of being at the class! These students (and many others) have a real testimony of God’s protecting grace.

## UPCOMING WORSHIP EVENTS



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sponsored by Christ Community Church and *Worship Reformation Network* (PCA)

This year’s theme: “Sacred Stewardship”

April 17-19, 2008 Franklin TN

info [HERE](#)



July 22-25, 2008 Baylor University  
info [HERE](#)



This year's theme: "Rediscovering the Psalms"  
July 30–August 2, 2008 Gaithersburg, Maryland  
info [HERE](#)

## COMING NEXT MONTH: Thematic Worship

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