

“I have read and heard preached a ton on the reality that ‘all of life is worship.’ It is, and I wouldn’t want to dispute that point. But what about when the covenant people of God gather together? Are there not some ways God desires us to worship corporately that can differ from how we worship in ‘all of life’? Mike Cospser has served the church well with *Rhythms of Grace*. I was both convicted and compelled as I read it.”

Matt Chandler, Lead Pastor, The Village Church; President, Acts 29 Church Planting Network

“Mike Cospser is uniquely gifted as both a musician and a pastor to speak into the culture where art and church meet and mesh. This is an important book for folks thinking about what it is to be a musician, a worship leader, and everything in between. The historic question of how we worship on Sunday and with our lives is an important one to keep asking because the songs we sing have the power to shape who we are and who we will become as individuals and as a community.”

Sandra McCracken, singer-songwriter

“Years ago, A. W. Tozer remarked that worship was the missing jewel of the evangelical church. Since that time, evangelicals have been engaged in an urgent and sometimes feverish struggle to determine the nature of true biblical worship. In *Rhythms of Grace*, Mike Cospser takes us back to first principles and roots his understanding of worship deeply within the context of the Christian gospel. This is a book that will offer much to Christians and church leaders seeking to understand worship. It is both biblical and deeply practical, and it is written by an author who has deep experience in the worship life of a thriving and faithful congregation.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Reading Mike’s *Rhythms of Grace* was like sitting across the table from someone you need to be listening to. In this season of the church, there is some confusion on what a worship leader is and does, and why. This book brings great clarity to those questions. As someone who aims to see song leaders become worship leaders and worship leaders become worship pastors, I found this to be a key resource. This will be an important text in training new leaders, and a great reminder to more seasoned leaders, to sing the gospel and, above all, highlight Jesus.”

Charlie Hall, Worship and Arts Director, Frontline Church, Oklahoma City

“I know of no one more insightful on questions of worship than Mike Cospers, and I know of no one more gifted to articulate a Christ-focused, kingdom-directed, Spirit-driven sense of what it means to worship in the presence of the triune God. Read this book and see if it does not drive you to repattern your worship to fit the full rejoicing, lamenting, raging force of biblical adoration of God.”

Russell D. Moore, Dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“When Mike Cospers writes, I read. And even though I’m not a pastor and don’t play the guitar, I learned a lot from him about how the gospel of grace shapes our rhythms of congregational worship. Pick up this book and benefit from his biblical wisdom and pastoral experience.”

Collin Hansen, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition; coauthor, *A God-Sized Vision: Revival Stories That Stretch and Stir*

“This book challenges worship leaders not merely to announce a gospel of grace in Jesus Christ, but also to begin to discover how that gospel reshapes every dimension and element of worship. It invites readers into a world where theology and practice, belief and action are intimately intertwined—where every practice reflects and then reinforces a theological vision, and every doctrine both grounds and sharpens practices. Who better to offer this challenge and invitation than a reflective practitioner who considers it a joy to discern the implications of this gospel of grace for a host of practical concerns, week-by-week, year-by-year?”

John D. Witvliet, Director, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship; Professor of Worship, Theology, and Congregational and Ministry Studies, Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary

“We don’t need another book telling us how to do worship to grow our church or connect with our culture. We need historical rootedness, not contemporary fads. We need to be taught so that we can teach the church to worship along with the story line of the gospel.”

Darrin Patrick, Lead Pastor, The Journey, St. Louis; author, *For the City and Church Planter: The Man, The Message, The Mission*

“I can’t overstate my excitement about Mike Cospers’s new book *Rhythms of Grace*. This practical volume represents the many years my good friend has spent in serious theological reflection, doxological engagement, and faithful service in the body of Christ—at Sojourn Church and well beyond. Mike’s passion for God’s glory and God’s worship are evident on every page. In particular, I’m thankful for how Mike helps us plan our services of worship in light of the history of redemption and the riches of God’s grace. Liturgy isn’t a four-letter word; it’s the storyboard that helps us connect with God’s commitment to redeem people, places, and things through the person and work of Jesus. I will use Mike’s tremendous book in the seminary classes I teach on worship; but I will also place it in the hands of seasoned worship leaders and young congregants alike. Thanks, dear brother, for your art and heart!”

Scotty Smith, Founding Pastor, Christ Community Church,
Franklin, Tennessee

“The greatest composers are gifted synthesizers. They have the ability to weave what they’ve heard and learned and experienced in the past into their own musical stories. If *Rhythms of Grace* were a symphony, the critics would hail it as a masterful work of synthesis—a fusion of biblical, historical, cultural, and philosophical elements into an engaging, challenging, and thoughtful treatment of worship. At the end of this work, you’ll also be able to sing the primary thematic motif—the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Joseph Crider, Senior Associate Dean, School of Church Ministries,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“For the glory and enjoyment of God, the health of the church, and the spread of the gospel—this is why you should read *Rhythms of Grace* by Mike Cospers. In this book Mike proves to be a good pastor, giving us a practical theology of worship that cautions against and corrects error, while shepherding us toward a more biblically faithful understanding and experience of worship in the church gathered and scattered.”

Joe Thorn, author, *Note to Self: The Discipline of Preaching to Yourself*;
Lead Pastor, Redeemer Fellowship, St. Charles, Illinois

“An important contribution to the discussion among many younger evangelicals about worship and liturgy. Mike writes with grace, and with wisdom beyond his years. Frankly, I am amazed by the amount of ground he manages to cover! Mike introduces us to ideas and thinkers that we all in the evangelical world should know. He has set a lofty goal, painting a picture of liturgy as a beautiful way, and I believe he succeeds. For anyone nervous about exploring the world of liturgy, Mike is a gentle and wise companion.”

Kevin Twit, Campus Minister, RUF; Founder, Indelible Grace Music

“Mike Cospers has written a book that is both easily accessible and deeply challenging for all who want to see worship flourish in their congregations. *Rhythms of Grace* is a must read—especially for church musicians and pastors who desire to deepen their understanding of how worship shapes and forms individuals and communities.”

Isaac Wardell, Founder, Bifrost Arts

“For many churches, a well-thought-out approach to how to lead music is woefully lacking. This needs to change, and this book will surely help. *Rhythms of Grace* is a book I will rely on in the future to develop music leaders for our church and the churches we plant. Clear, beautifully written, theologically grounded, and yet very practically helpful and completely gospel-centered—this is a book for pastors and music leaders alike. In fact, I would get two copies so that pastors and musicians can read it together!”

Zach Nielson, Pastor, The Vine Church, Madison, Wisconsin

RHYTHMS OF GRACE

HOW THE CHURCH'S *Worship* TELLS
THE STORY OF THE GOSPEL

MIKE COSPER

FOREWORD BY BOB KAUFMAN

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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FOREWORD

The first time I heard the title of Mike Cospers' book, I wondered if he couldn't have come up with something a little catchier.

Rhythms of Grace. What does that even mean? A manual on using percussion for the glory of God? Maybe a Christian version of *Dancing with the Stars*?

Actually, I'd enjoy reading Mike's thoughts on either of those topics, because he's a superb writer. But the subtitle clears up any confusion. *How the Church's Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel*.

I've known Mike Cospers for about ten years now. And of all the things I appreciate about him and his work with Sojourn Music, this tops the list: Mike Cospers is a gospel-saturated man. It's why even though we come from very different backgrounds and I'm old enough to be his dad, I've come to count him as a dear friend. Mike doesn't merely use the word *gospel* as an add-on adjective to impress people. He expounds on it, explains it, rehearses it, celebrates it. He approaches his life, his marriage, his family, his church, and his world in view of the gospel: Jesus's perfect life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection. And he carries a deep and relentless burden that others would do the same.

And that's why he wrote *Rhythms of Grace*. He explains it like this:

[Congregational] worship is an invitation to step into the rhythms of grace. We remember our identity as gospel-formed people, journeying together through the story that gave us our identity and being sent out to live gospel-shaped lives. Practiced in these rhythms, we learn to think in them, much as we learn to improvise on an instrument.

If you're a musician like me, you get the necessity of repetition. I spent four years pursuing a piano performance degree,

practicing at times up to ten hours a day. My goal was to be proficient enough at the end of college to play anything I wanted to. Not a very God-glorifying goal, but clear and simple.

I immersed myself daily in the mechanics of technique, scales, arpeggios. I gave dogged attention to the details of dynamics, tempo, pedaling, and style. In the end, it set me free to actually make music. And it wasn't always simply reproducing notes on a page. My practice helped me stretch out beyond printed music to create melodies, harmonies, and rhythms on my own. But they were all rooted in the knowledge of music I had gained in the practice room.

Rhythms of Grace is largely an apologetic for repetition, but its effects and ends are far more transcendent than learning how to improvise on the piano. It teaches us how to live before a holy and gracious God in light of the gospel, and how our meetings can serve that end.

In an engaging, compelling, and creative way, Mike traces the story of grace God has been weaving since before the dawn of time. It's a story filled with hope, tragedy, conquest, defeat, desperation, beauty, pain, and inexpressible glory. It's the most important story that will ever be told. And it's a story we are easily and quickly prone to forget.

Mike takes our hand and skillfully walks us through that story, from the garden of Eden, through the wilderness, through Israel's checkered history, until we finally arrive at the point of the story, Jesus. At numerous times I was caught up in the utter brilliance and sheer beauty of God's sovereign plan of redemption.

Mike goes on to review the relative success of the church in continuing the gospel story. The final chapters are devoted to unpacking the practical implications of all this for our participation and leadership in the church today. Along the way, Mike winsomely but firmly addresses things like avoiding common errors we've made, choosing musical styles, and developing a gospel-informed liturgy.

While you may not agree with every conclusion he comes to (I didn't!), I have no doubt that, like me, you'll benefit immensely

from the thoughtful way he addresses each issue. Most importantly, you'll come away with a clearer understanding of why the good news of Jesus Christ must shape, inform, govern, inspire, and fill our weekly gatherings.

There's a chance some of you might be put off by Mike's references to liturgy, that is, the order of events in the public meetings of the church. You may remember as a kid enduring years of weekly services that seemed dull, cold, and lifeless. And you're not about to give yourself to it again.

No worries. In his typical grace-filled and pastoral way, Mike helps us understand the difference between liturgical practices that seek to earn God's acceptance and liturgies that are wholehearted responses to God's grace in Christ. He reminds us of the humble and ennobling effect of identifying with Christians who have gone faithfully before us.

Apart from the content of *Rhythms of Grace*, which I can't commend highly enough, Mike's writing style is eminently enjoyable. He not only helps us see what is most important, but does it in a way that is accessible, imaginative, and beautiful.

I'm glad you'll be reading this book. If you read it carefully, I don't think you'll ever view Sundays the same way again. As Mike says:

Gathering for worship is a life-shaping moment in a congregation's week, and our task as pastors is to seize that opportunity for an all-out assault on their hearts. As servants of God, we prepare people for death, and we prepare them for eternity. And most of them just think they're "going to church."

May none of us ever think we are just "going to church." My prayer is that God would use this book to open your eyes wider to the glories of the gospel and the opportunity we have every week as the church of Jesus Christ to grow deeper in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Bob Kauflin
Louisville, Kentucky

PREFACE

I didn't set out to be a worship pastor. As with many pastors and worship leaders I know, it was sort of a happy accident. In the fall of 1999, I had big dreams of stardom. I wanted to be a record producer or a rock star. I was also a serious Christian, about to get married, and gathering regularly with a small group of wandering Christians in a Louisville apartment. We were all feeling disenfranchised from our home churches and were praying about what God would have us do next.

A mutual friend connected our prayer group with Daniel Montgomery, a seminary student who wanted to plant a church in our neighborhood, and a partnership was formed. A big chunk of our prayer group joined the core of the church, and in September 2000, Sojourn Community Church was born.

In the years prior to this, I'd led bands for a variety of youth and worship ministries, and so I was asked to serve as the coordinator for Sojourn's music ministry. Very soon this role took on a feeling of calling. I came on staff about a year later. I began learning the ropes of pastoring, preparing worship services, and working with artists. Fast forward a few years, and I'm a pastor. No one was more surprised than I.

A Growing Trend

I think my story isn't that uncommon, especially among the many young churches and church plants across the nation. Gifted musicians, eager to serve, find themselves stumbling into roles of leadership. Singer-songwriters and would-be rock stars fit the mold for worship leaders that has become a cultural norm and end up shaping the worship practices of congregations.

On the one hand, it has the potential to be a good thing. It's grass-roots leadership, emerging from a local context and shaping the church's culture. On the other, it's fraught with challenges. Worship pastors with little to no formal training are like boats adrift, trying to figure out what worship really is about, how it's best led and cultivated, and how it connects to Scripture, history, and the culture around us.

I was blessed with mentors and wise counselors who steered me in the direction of good resources, good thinking, and good shepherding. Many others aren't so lucky. Instead, they find themselves shaped by a culture of worship that's enmeshed with a culture of celebrity and consumerism. Worship leaders, it's believed, should be entertainers and performers, musicians with cool haircuts and wild song arrangements that dazzle and thrill. The task of preparing to gather with God's people is shaped by an insatiable and consumeristic need for the new and the cutting-edge. The short life cycle of worship songs today—hip today, gone tomorrow—is a clear symptom of a consumer society's shaping influence on the church.

I don't blame worship leaders. It's hard to blame anyone, really. These realities are utterly pervasive, and their impact occurs without anyone intending it. No one decides to be consumeristic. No one decides to embrace a celebrity culture or consumer attitude, but mass culture has a way of swallowing people and institutions whole, and one day you wake up wondering, "How did we get here?"

Asking Why?

I remember a particular moment, sometime in the first year or two of the church, when I found myself feeling particularly lost. I was off the platform that week, running sound in the back of the old, stone-walled church where Sojourn gathered. It was early in the life of our church plant, and the music was usually a rowdy, indie-rock affair, ringing off the limestone and stained glass and

encompassing the young congregation of 150 or so who peppered the pews. Though we weren't the most expressive church at the time (timid to sing out or raise hands), this service in particular was going well, and the people were as enthused as they ever got during a gathering.

Suddenly I thought, "How on earth did we get here?" I wasn't thinking about the building we rented or the church that was gathered. I was thinking much more broadly. The early church didn't have drums and guitars, and probably never saw anything like the "worship leaders" that were a standard presence in the churches I'd attended since I was a kid. Where did all of this come from?

It wasn't a foreboding feeling. I didn't think that we were playing with "strange fire" and doomed to condemnation, but I was suddenly aware of my own cluelessness. Why did we gather? Why did we sing? Why did we do it the way we did?

The *why* haunted me. Maybe there was a better way.

Our service had a general order like many churches'. We played fast songs to start the service, slower songs right before the sermon, and reversed the order at the end—slower songs leading to fast songs to send everyone out. I'd never considered why we did it that way. A worship service, I assumed, was worship (which meant music) and preaching.

Asking *why* about worship sent me on a long journey. It's tempting, when you begin to question why the church gathers, to get very discouraged by all that's problematic with worship culture. Celebrity pastors and worship leaders are everywhere, leading services that seem more about spectacle than substance. Some react to that culture by moralizing the value of the small, the local, the "organic." When you're disgusted by celebrity, the house church seems very alluring.

Along with some other pastors at Sojourn, I searched high and low, sitting at the feet of spiritual-formation gurus, learning from house-church movements, combing through book after book about the "emerging" church, and reading the critiques and

responses to that movement. The fads and hype piled up around us, and our despair grew. The search for clarity about what it meant to be the church and why we gathered only made the answers cloudier.

Somehow, the story of the gospel broke through the confusion.¹ In the churches where I'd grown up, the gospel was often treated as peripheral—the gateway to Christianity, but not central to ordinary Christian life. You deal with the gospel when you become a Christian, and then you move on to bigger things as you mature.

Like Christians throughout the centuries, the other pastors and I discovered that the gospel is far more than an entrance exam or a gateway; it is the center point for all of the Christian life. This story is the defining fact for all of our past, present, and future, and we needed to live and worship with that in mind.

“You know,” I thought, “if the gospel is supposed to be central to the Christian life, we should craft our worship services in such a way that they rehearse that story. Every week, we should gather and remember that God is holy, we are sinners, and Jesus saves us from our sins. We could do it with Scripture readings and songs and sermons and the Lord’s Supper. Every week is an opportunity to reorient ourselves around the greater story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.” I thought I was brilliant and innovative. In truth, I was only rediscovering what many generations of Christians had discovered long, long before.

Worship as Gospel Remembrance

If you look at almost any historical worship service or worship order, you’ll find that all basically engage in the same dialogue; they all rehearse the gospel story. There is plenty of variation in the details or in the degree of clarity, but the dialogue is generally the same. God is holy. We are sinners. Jesus saves us from our sins. We gather, remember our identity-shaping story, and

¹I talk much more about this journey and the “discovery” of the gospel in *Faithmapping*, which I wrote with Daniel Montgomery, our lead pastor.

send one another back into the wider world, allowing that story to shape us as we go.

It's a rhythm of life, forming our identity as a gospel-shaped people. It's a gospel rhythm, reminding us of our dependence and Christ's sufficiency. It's a rhythm of grace, spurring us on to live in the life-giving outpouring of love and mercy from the God of the universe.

Soon after rediscovering the gospel, my colleagues and I rediscovered these rhythms of grace. We began to see how the story shapes the community, and the movements of gathering and sending continue to tell the story as the church lives out its mission in the wider world. Recognizing this revolutionized church, worship, and mission for us because we saw the gospel clearly at the center. It also changed the way we saw worship. The gospel was actually all about worship, once broken by sin, now restored in Jesus. Worship, too, was all about the gospel, rehearsing the story and allowing it to shape the lives of the worshiping church.

In the pages that follow, I want to retrace that story in broad strokes. In chapters 1–4, I want to revisit creation, fall, and redemption with an eye toward how worship shifts and changes from Eden (chap. 1), to the wilderness (chap. 2), to Israel (chap. 3), to Jesus (chap. 4). From there, I want to look at where we are now (chap. 5, “Worship One, Two, Three”) and what the goal of the gathering is (chap. 6, “Worship as Spiritual Formation”). Chapter 7, on the rhythms of grace, is a walk through the practices the church has engaged in historically when it has gathered; this chapter explores both how we can engage in those same practices when we gather and how they shape life when we scatter out into the world. Chapter 8, “Liturgy and the Rhythms of Grace,” is about the parts of a worship service and how they work together. Chapter 9 deals with the importance of singing and some of the challenges that come with contemporary music in the gathered church. Finally, chapter 10, “The Pastoral Worship Leader,” looks at worship leading as a pastoral calling, exploring it through the life and work of Isaac Watts.

It's my hope that this book will benefit a variety of folks. I've written it with the desire to help pastors, worship leaders, volunteers in worship ministries, and ordinary churchgoing worshipers participate in worship with more clarity and intentionality. There's a lot of talk about gospel-centered ministry these days, and sometimes that can feel like a rubber stamp. I hope to actually show in some detail the connection between the gospel and worship, and to talk very practically about how that can get worked out in the gatherings of the church.

What I'm Leaving Out

There are certain issues I've chosen to either give minimal detail or leave out entirely. My intention here is to introduce some ideas about the story of worship and the church. Mostly I'm telling that story from about a fifty-thousand-foot elevation, and my hope is that if something strikes your interest, you'll dig into it further.

Preaching, Communion, and baptism, for instance, could have consumed this entire book, and while there is no doubt in my mind that these are crucial issues for worship in the local church, here I want to spend more energy emphasizing the story of worship and the broader purposes of the gathering. Within the broad framework that I'll lay out, preaching, Communion, and baptism all have their places, and I think that will be clear.

I don't deal much with church governance or ecclesiology either. Various traditions have various rules governing how they worship and how they plan worship, and I don't intend to take on any of those structures in this book. Instead, I want to point to the practices that most traditions share to one degree or another and see how the gospel informs them, even as the practices form and shape us.²

I'm also staying away from the debates about the regulative principle and the normative principle. If you're unfamiliar with

²For the record, I'm a Protestant, Reformed Baptist, in a strongly Free Church tradition, and I write from that vantage point. Nonetheless, I think there is much common ground among evangelicals because most of the church's worship practices are centered on the story of the gospel.

these terms, they involve a long-standing debate about what the church should and shouldn't do when it gathers, according to Scripture. While I'm sympathetic to the regulative principle in principle (no pun intended), I agree with Mark Driscoll, who said the phrase "has been so widely abused, misused and misrepresented, it is not a very helpful term any longer."³ The debates around it are complex and exhausting, and I didn't want to dive into the details here.⁴ New Testament theologian D. A. Carson has said, "For all their differences, theologically rich and serious services from both camps often have more common content than either side usually acknowledges."⁵ With that in mind, I think most of what I have to say here can apply to either camp.

A Note on Language

One final caveat on the word *worship*. I go to some effort here to make clear that worship is both an all-of-life, "scattered" reality and a uniquely communal, "gathered" reality. I also make a significant effort to clarify that Jesus is our one true worship leader. With that said, I think it's okay to use the words *worship* and *worship leader* when talking about a service for the gathered church and those who lead such a service. Though this may drive some of you crazy, that's certainly not my intention.

³Driscoll, *Religion Saves*, 256.

⁴D. A. Carson's discussion of it in "Worship under the Word," chapter 1 of *Worship by the Book*, is very helpful, as is Driscoll's chapter on the topic in *Religion Saves*.

⁵Carson, *Worship by the Book*, 55.

THE SONG OF EDEN

The gospel is a story about worship. It begins with promise and serenity, spins wildly and terribly off course, and is rescued in the most unexpected and surprising way possible. I want to tell that story.

Worship as Story

I want to tell it because I think we don't get it. When we say the word *worship*, a lot of activity comes to mind—singing, reading the Scriptures, preaching, praying, celebrating baptism and the Lord's Supper—but we often see those practices as ends in themselves. Doing so defines worship in our minds as merely a list of things that we *do* even if we aren't certain about why we do them. They become empty duties, and we start to believe that it's necessary to do them to earn God's favor. Worship then becomes associated with religiosity—a belief that good behavior qualifies us for membership in God's family. We begin to doubt our standing before God any time we miss a worship service, or we don't participate enthusiastically, or we don't identify emotionally with the content of the songs, prayers, and sermons. Obviously, we just need to try harder and get it right at the next gathering.

Or do we? The story of worship as told in the Bible defines worship in a radically different and surprising way. It's a story that surprises us because we discover that it doesn't primarily feature us. The star of the story is God, who is at the center of all worship but is also at its origins in history and its origins in our hearts. The story of worship (like the story of the gospel) is all about God.

I want to tell that story because I believe it will reinvigorate our passion for worship and for all the activities we normally associate with it. The gospel story *is* the worship story. Worship was God's idea as he initiated creation. Just when it looked as though sin had corrupted worship beyond repair, he rescued it by sending his Son and making a way through him to worship the Father again. The Son, in turn, sent his Spirit, who awakened corpses like you and me and put a song in our hearts that we'll be singing with every breath from here to eternity.

So buckle up. Let's dive into the story of worship, which is to say, let's dive into the story of the gospel. Because the gospel is all about worship.

Before the Foundations of the World

When we think about the beginning of the gospel story, we tend to think Genesis 1. There the author brings us to the explosive moment when God spoke creation into existence. It's a good place to begin, for sure, but perhaps we should start in the moments before then. To even imagine that, we can hear the words from the Gospel of John, where the apostle tells us that before the dawning of creation, there was the loving community of the Trinity (see John 1:1; 17:24).

So before the world began, there was love. It flowed—perfect, complete, and constant—between the three persons of the Trinity. This love was an unending appreciation, a perpetual beholding and rejoicing in the goodness and perfection of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The scene was what theologian Fred Sanders calls the “happy land of the Trinity.”¹ It was, and is, a totally self-sufficient community of love and glory.

At its heart, worship is rooted in this love. The Trinitarian community is, in a sense, perpetually beholding one another with love and amazement. We're able to peek through the windows on that love in the Bible, where we see the Son worship the Father,

¹Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*, 81.

the Father adore and exalt the Son, and the Spirit being both celebrated and celebrating the others. The word *worship* comes from the Old English *weorthscipe*, which combines two words meaning “ascribe worth.” The Trinity can be said to be always at worship because the three persons of the Godhead perfectly behold the worth and wonder of one another.

To our imaginations, it’s probably strange (at the least) or gross (at the worst) to envision anyone perpetually exalting himself. We live in a world full of bluster and bragging, where Nicki Minaj boasts “I’m the best,” LeBron James tattoos “Chosen 1” across his shoulders, and everyone from pastors to porn stars are self-celebrating on Twitter and Facebook. The idea that God would be associated with anything like that behavior is disconcerting.

But God’s own self-adoration is nothing like ours. Unlike our own self-congratulatory spirit, God’s view of himself is unmis-taken and unexaggerated. As hymn writer Fredrick Lehman said:

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above,
Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.²

God’s glory and perfection are inexhaustible. We can’t say enough about how glorious he truly is. The greatest gift he can give us is a revelation of himself. Exalting anything else would be cruel.

Creation: God’s Overflowing Love

It’s out of the overflow of this endless love that God created the world. The whole Trinity is present at creation’s dawn as the Father speaks, the Son—who is the Word—carries out the creative work, and the Spirit fills the creation with heavenly presence: “In

²Frederick M. Lehman, “The Love of God,” 1917.

the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:1–3).

In *The Silmarillion*, J. R. R. Tolkien imagines the creation of the world as a divine chorale, with creation appearing out of nothingness like a glorious unfurling tapestry as God sings and the heavenly hosts watch in awe and wonder. It's easy to imagine it this way as you read the opening passages of Genesis. Each day builds momentum as the cast of creation makes its appearance.

First out of nothingness come the heaven and earth, then the explosion of light and the division of day and night. Once upon a time, there was no light. Then suddenly come billions of boiling stars and galaxies. The waters of the seas part and the Creator's imagination spins out majestic mountains and valleys, volcanos and rivers, deserts and icebergs, each one carved up by light and shadow. The song continues as life begins to teem and whirl, grass takes root, and redwoods stretch heavenward. Kelp forests and grapevines sprawl and spin. Grasslands roll in rhythm with newborn tides.

Then come the animals. The dinosaurs. The dolphins. Lemmings and lightning bugs. Hummingbirds and wildebeests. There are themes like reptiles and bears, and variations upon each theme: polar bears, grizzly bears, black bears, Asiatic bears, panda bears. Creation has an improvisatory flair, bursting with imaginative energy and glory.

As God sings the song of creation, the creation responds with its own exaltations. "The heavens declare the glory of God," as the psalmist says (Ps. 19:1). Creation's song can be heard in the crash of perfect, spiraling waves on the coast of South Africa and the explosion of lava on Hawaii. Its melody is as subtle as the whirring of bees and as gentle as a breeze across the black hills of South Dakota. The psalmist isn't merely being metaphorical; he's notic-

ing that God has imbued creation with a song that can be heard by ears tuned to the work of the Creator.

The Trinity's song roars to a climax on the sixth day. Dust is gathered and sculpted into flesh and bone, and into the new-formed lungs of Adam God gives man his first breath. Adam's first exhale is an entirely new kind of "hallelujah," the response of the firstborn image bearer of God.

Here, the Bible shows us that God isn't the disinterested god of the deists, who imagine him drawing up the world on a drafting board, winding it up like a clock, and leaving it to spin alone. Nor was creation a cosmic accident or the product of warring gods who sought to outdo one another.

Instead, the universe is the work of immeasurable brilliance, crafted with love and grace, and inhabited by the presence of the Creator, whose Word made the world and whose world sings of his glory, from the smallest blade of grass to the aurora borealis. Creation was made out of the overflow of God's own effusive and loving being, a reflection of the way the persons of the Trinity live in harmony, love, and community with one another.

And we were invited to join him in his song.

Adam: Creation's Worship Leader

Adam and Eve were the crown of creation, blessed with an image and breath given straight from the Creator, and tasked with carrying on the creative work on a scale suited to their smallness: subduing the earth and ruling over it (Gen. 1:28). God placed them in a garden called Eden, and the call to subdue the earth was an invitation to expand the garden out into the world around them. Adam and Eve were king and queen in a world ruled and inhabited by God, who reigned as King over them all.

The garden itself was more than an agricultural project.³ It was a meeting place for God and man, where God "walked" among humanity (Gen. 3:8). It was the first temple, the first sacred space,

³For more on the garden of Eden as a temple, see G. K. Beale's excellent work *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 68–80.

set apart from creation for the intersection of heaven and earth. Adam was, in a sense, the priest over all of creation, appointed by God to oversee it, steward it, and represent it before him.

But Adam wasn't leading worship services or doing ritualistic things to earn God's approval. There was no need; each moment of his life was a pleasing offering to God. Theologian John Witvliet defines worship as "the celebrative response to what God has done, is doing, and promises to do."⁴ For Adam and Eve, all of life in Eden was an unbroken, loving response to God's work as their Creator, caretaker, and Lord. As they lived in harmony with him, it was as if they drew together all of creation's praise into a single and unified "hallelujah" and "amen." N. T. Wright summarizes this nicely when he says of creation, "We see a large, slowly developing story: of the good creator God making a wonderful world, and putting a Human in charge of it to rule it wisely and to gather up its grateful praise"⁵

This is how the universe is meant to work. God, in Trinity, creates the world. It's not part of him, but he nonetheless fills it with his presence and paints it with a vast panorama of beauty and brilliance, commissioning humankind to rule over it, nurture it, and enjoy it in his presence. Worship as an activity that's somehow separate from the rest of life appears nonexistent and, frankly, unnecessary. In the seamless perfection of that virgin world, it is all worship—a constant reflection of God's love, glory, and brilliance.

When we think about the story of worship with this as our point of origin, we see that worship starts with God. It begins in the loving relationships of the Trinity, where the Father exalts the Son, the Son exalts the Father, and the Spirit celebrates them both. This is what Harold Best calls "continuous outpouring."

He cannot but give of himself, reveal himself, pour himself out.
Even before he chooses to create, and before he chooses to reveal

⁴ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 31.

⁵ Wright, *After You Believe*, 84.

himself beyond himself, he eternally pours himself out to his triune Self in unending fellowship, ceaseless conversation and immeasurable love unto an infinity of the same.⁶

Creation flows out of this glory-sharing outpouring, as the Three-in-One craft the universe together, imbuing it with beauty, mystery, and glory that is itself a reflection of the wonder and glory of God. Humanity is appointed the vanguard of creation, tasked with overseeing and subduing the earth, serving as priests of creation, and bearing God's image. Glory sharing flows between the members of the Trinity toward one another, and all of creation (including humanity) participates, responding to it and reflecting it through their perfect design and sinless life together. Humanity participates as glory bearers (Ps. 8:4–5) and glory beholders—living in wonder of our Creator and the glorious creation song that hums and buzzes around us.

All of this happens without a hint of ritual. There are no separated-out worship services; there is only the glorious and glorifying life lived with and unto God.⁷ If someone were to ask Adam, “When do you worship God?” he might reply, “When do we not!” Worship isn't something other, external, compartmentalized, or confined. It is life with God, lived unto God for his glory and our pleasure.

Forgetting the Creator

Everything changes dramatically in Genesis 3, when the serpent creeps into the garden: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1).

Eve speaks up, saying, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die’” (Gen. 3:2–3). Eve defends God's integrity. The serpent,

⁶Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 21.

⁷See Boulton, *God against Religion*, 64: “In Genesis 2, the author . . . describes life in the garden in some detail, and yet we find in this description neither sanctuary nor altar, neither psalm nor sacrifice.”

wanting to make God out to be oppressive, says in effect, “Does God not let you eat anything?” Eve affirms that God, indeed, let’s them eat, but with one restriction; God has told them not to eat of the tree of knowledge.

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Gen. 3:4–7)

Up to this moment, nothing has ever been done apart from the life and love of God. Now, suddenly a whole new world opens up. The seed of that forbidden fruit will sprout deep in human hearts, spreading out roots and branches that will encompass the whole of humanity’s future, blossoming into pride and envy, murder and deceit. Every crime, personal and corporate, private and public, grows out of this common root, from sex trafficking to genocide, adultery to petty theft. Life with God is rejected and life without God, embraced. The bite from that fruit is truly the kiss of death.

If worship is about “ascribing worth,” then it’s easy to see where worship goes wrong. Adam and Eve think what they’ll gain from the fruit is of greater worth than what they have with God. They trust the serpent instead of God’s promise. In Paul’s words, they worship and serve created things—the serpent and themselves—rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

In this new world apart from God, Adam and Eve are naked—their sinfulness is hopelessly exposed. They hurry to cover their shame with fig leaves, trying desperately to compensate for their new-felt vulnerability and exposure.

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (Gen. 3:8–13)

Adam and Eve can't even properly take responsibility for what they've done. They cower in the trees until God calls them out. Adam blames Eve ("the woman whom you gave to be with me") and Eve blames the serpent ("the serpent deceived me").

The consequences are unavoidable, and God announces the curses that they've brought upon themselves: Adam will suffer and die, working ground that fights against him for the remainder of his days. Eve will suffer agony in childbirth and discord in marriage. The serpent in particular faces the ultimate curse, which for Adam and Eve is a promise: one of Eve's offspring will crush his head.

Then comes a subtle and remarkable verse: "And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21). Here, something wholly remarkable happens. God seeks them out in their sin and shame, and then, as Harold Best once put it, he "goes hunting for them."⁸ Their sin demands death, but God spares them by shedding the blood of a proxy. An innocent creature is killed, and its flayed flesh is made into a covering for Adam and Eve, a sign of both the cost of their shame and the grace of their God, who spares their lives and takes another. It's the first of many foreshadowings of the cross in the Scriptures, a glimpse into the mysterious plan of

⁸From personal correspondence, April 2012.

God, written before the foundation of the world, to slay his Son in our place.

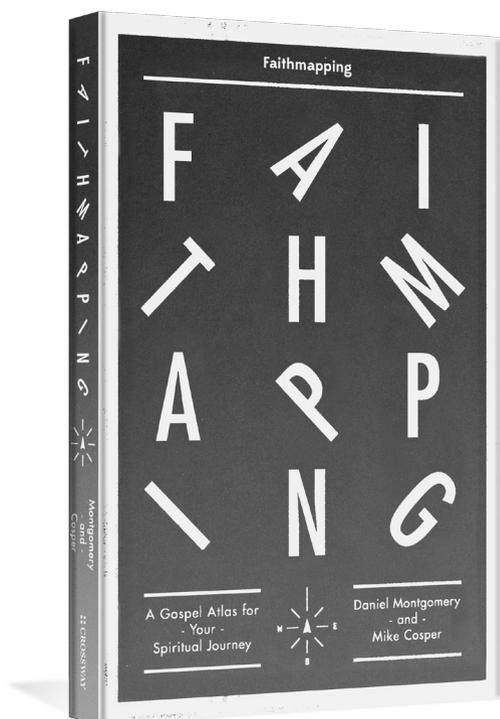
Into the Wilderness

Worship is essentially about ascribing worth. As sinless image bearers, Adam and Eve were part of creation's perpetual testimony to the worthiness—the goodness, glory, brilliance, and beauty—of God's handiwork. As soon as they sinned, they broke rank with that testimony, choosing to exalt and serve their own glory. They then faced the consequences of ascribing ultimate worth to themselves and were cast out of the lush comfort of the garden into the rocky soil of the wilderness. The abundant fruit that grew upon trees and vines was replaced with thorns and thistles. The sanctuary of the temple was replaced with the danger of the wild, with lurking beasts, vicious storms, and the greatest danger of all: the corrupted hearts of one another.

Genesis 1–3 is like a great Greek tragedy. They have it all and they fall so far, and yet God graciously pursues them. It's also a microcosm of everything the Bible has to tell us about worship.

Sin calls for death, and blood is shed in the garden, but not Adam's blood or Eve's. God himself takes the life of a substitute and wraps the naked frames of our great-grandparents in clothes that hide their shame. The broken worship they share with the serpent leaves them naked and humiliated, but before God sends them off into the barrens, he makes a sacrifice and a garb for them. It's a foretaste of worship restored, with Adam and Eve stepping again into participation with God's work as he stakes a bloody claim upon them and marks them as his own.

*An exploration of the whole gospel
for the whole church for the sake
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