

WORSHIP



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INTRODUCTION

A Metaphor for Corporate Worship

One of the traditions that we share in North America is the Thanksgiving meal. Turkey, gravy, stuffing, mashed potatoes—even the idea of the meal conjures up sights and smells in our mind.

What makes this meal special? More than just food, there are a lot of things that we literally bring to the table. First, we gather as a family—immediate and extended, young and old, rich and poor, normal and not-so-normal—and in our diversity, we share these invisible bonds of fellowship. No one is left out. We also acknowledge the beautiful table setting, the delicious smells coming from the kitchen, and one another. In this atmosphere, there is an anticipation that something very special is about to happen.

As we gather, we share family stories, good and bad, funny and poignant—that hilarious incident that happened to Uncle Joe, the time that Aunt Jane burned the turkey, the year that brother Jim was serving overseas and couldn't make it. Some of these stories are told and retold every Thanksgiving, but no one minds, because we love hearing them—they are the story of us.

Then the turkey is presented, and we ooh and aah at the amazing culinary miracles that Mom pulls off every year. We hold hands, give thanks, and remember our Good and Great God. And as we share in the meal, partake of the good company, even watch and cheer the Thanksgiving football game, there is this over-arching understanding that this Thanksgiving is one of many that have come before, and one of many that will come after. We are fully immersed in the traditions that give us meaning and significance.

The Thanksgiving meal is a great metaphor for what we try to accomplish in our Sunday worship service.

- We gather as God's family, everyone together in generational, gender, racial, and socio-economic diversity. We gather as an accepting, inclusive, grace-filled community.
- We tell the larger story of God, and contextualize it to the stories that God is writing in our lives.
- We acknowledge God for who He is, and for His mighty acts.
- We enjoy one another in fellowship, and encourage one another in our faith.
- We do all of these things through traditions, both universal to the Church and specific to our particular church.
- We use the very best of the arts to express ourselves in this gathering.
- And as we worship, we understand that we join in the greater community of believers past and present, here and around the world, as well as with all of creation, in glorifying God.

It is important to understand that at Oak Hills, our corporate worship is driven by our theology. Everything that we do—programmatically, stylistically, and artistically—springs from our beliefs. And everything we are as a church, with our corporate personality and style, springs from who God made us to be. This is because we believe that foundationally, corporate worship is spiritually formative. When we come before God with humility and an open heart, we cannot help but be changed.

About This Study

This study is divided into nine short devotional guides, designed for interaction in a small group discussion format. Specifically, there are Discussion Questions to accompany each devotional. We encourage you to read this with others, and interact not only with the content, but with one another. We trust that, in the process, God will meet you there as well.

We don't claim to know all the answers as it regards to worship, nor do we claim that our way is the best way. This study simply explains—and hopefully enlightens—our journey of worship at Oak Hills Church.

Finally, though each study is relatively short, there are some deep and somewhat mysterious concepts that are covered. We encourage you to approach this study with humility and a heart that is open to learn. Set aside your preconceptions and your preferences of worship. And let God be the focus of our worship.

PART 1: FIRST THINGS FIRST

The Tail Wagging the Dog

Talk to the average person about their worship experience at their church, and they're bound to describe it in terms of the *Style* of worship—whether it was modern, contemporary, traditional, or even just loud. However, style can be simply a surface issue. Unfortunately, most churches define their worship in this way too. In a worship sense, the tail wags the dog.

We believe that crafting corporate worship does not begin with style, but with more substantive issues. Specifically, we must understand our *Theology* of worship. Now, *Theology* is a fancy word for “what do you believe about God as it relates to something.” So when we say a “theology of worship,” we simply mean, “what we believe about God as it relates to worship.” And this is fundamentally where to begin. What we believe about the Trinity, creation, redemption, the sacraments, the Church, and living out our faith forms the basis of our worship.

Because of our theology, we prioritize the *Content* of the worship. We are a people redeemed by the God of creation. This content, the story of God's redemptive work, lays the foundation of our worship.

Our service format, or *Structure*, serves the content—it works to remind us or even retell God's story. We base our service structure on the fundamental Four-Fold Movement, which has its root in the ancient Christian church. These four Movements—*Gathering*, *Service of the Word*, *Service of the Table* and *Sending*—are inherent in every worship service, regardless of the style, and all work to elucidate the content of our faith.

- *Gathering*. We invite the people of God to enter into community with one another and before the community of the Trinity. This includes Gathering Songs, Call to Worship, Invocation, Acts of Praise, Community Prayer, and Offering.
- *Word*. We allow the Word of God to speak to us, through Scripture Reading, Message, Testimony, and even related artistic elements that support the Message.

- *Table*. Through the Communion Table, we enter into the sacrament of communion, experiencing the unique outpouring of God beyond mere symbol through the bread and cup.
- *Sending*. We respond to the Truth by living it out among one another and to the world.

Knowing our *Content* and *Structure*, we are then free to apply our *Style* upon it. *Style* can be defined not just by the type of music but more so by our unique subculture. In other words, *Style* reflects the corporate personality and distinctiveness of the people. Our *Style* at Oak Hills can be described as informal, ironic, deep-thinking, and musically diverse with a contemporary flavor.

So in summary, Theology informs our Content, and our Content informs our Structure. And both this Content and Structure informs our Style, which is based upon our corporate personality. By crafting our corporate worship according to this order of priorities, we ensure that the services are about the deeper, more substantive matters of our faith. [We will be covering these issues throughout the remainder of this study.]

Implications

- If we craft our worship primarily on the basis of what songs and other artistic elements we like, we will simply be catering to our own stylistic preferences and whims. The danger then is to measure the success or failure of the service based on how people liked it (a man-centric goal). However, if we base our worship on how true we were to our theology, then we are less apt to measure the success on our preferences and more apt to measure our success according to our faithfulness to God's story.

This is not to say that we shouldn't *like* our worship experience. But our worship experience is a byproduct of "good" worship, not the product of it.

- The Four-Fold Movement provides a logical—and natural—flow to the service which allows people to enter, celebrate, reflect, hear from God, commemorate, and respond. By adopting this Four-Fold Movement, we also understand that we are entering into traditions that were formed by the ancient church. We enter into something greater than ourselves.
- Finally, the Four-Fold Movement incorporates important theological concepts that we will be covering over the next eight devotionals (nine parts in all).

Questions for Discussion

You may not have even realized that we use a four-fold movement in our services. But picture a service where these elements are mixed up or missing. How would you feel about it?

Take an element of the worship service that you often have opinions about—songs, readings of scripture, artistic elements—and consider what it means to have Content and Structure come before Style. Would you frame your conversation about your opinions differently if content is the greater priority?

Does style still matter? Yes, it does. But style should be a reflection of our corporate personality. How does that make you think differently, in light of the diversity of our congregation, about your own personal stylistic preferences?

PART 2: GOD'S STORY

The Author of Days

The story of all that was and is and is to come is the story of God. This larger story, sometimes referred to as the Christian “meta-narrative,” is a crucial element in understanding our Christian faith, for it is the story of God’s activity in the universe through time as it has been revealed to us. This meta-narrative can be described as the continuing three-act play of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. As Christ-followers, we can relate to this meta-narrative, as each of our lives is a story that mirrors and fits into the larger story of God, who is the Author of Days.

Robert E. Webber contends that “worship is a rehearsal of the saving deeds of God in history.” If you look at worship in the Old Testament—the many feasts, Passover, and even the regular gatherings in the synagogue—you see that worship is centered on the re-telling of God’s redemption. This is the worship of the people of Israel, of David, of Jesus. Not only is it an encounter with God, it is an encounter with the Truth of God—who He is, what He has done, and what He continues to do. We are reminded that God is still in the business of enfolding our redemption stories into His redemptive meta-narrative. And we respond to this revelation in humility, gratitude, and obedience. We respond in worship.

In the midst of this story is the crux of all time and eternity: Jesus Christ. Jesus, in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, is the convergent central character in all of history. In the words of our Advent Liturgy, “All of history converges in Christ, and everything changes in the light of His coming.”

So when we gather together in corporate worship, one of our primary functions as worship leaders is to tell God’s story. We do so in all four of the movements of the service—*Gathering* (of which *Acts of Praise* is a part), *The Service of the Word*, *The Service of the Table* (think of the act of Communion as Jesus’ beautiful retelling of the story of redemption), and *Sending*. We also tell the story through the church calendar, with the celebrations of Advent, Lent, and Holy Week (more on this in Part 8: Time Redeemed). And we do so through testimonies, baptisms, and other elements where we celebrate God’s work in our lives and in the lives of others. Through it all, we anticipate God’s on-going work of redemption and re-creation in the world.

Here’s an example of this. Our Call To Worship, found in the *Gathering* Movement, is typically a Scripture that reveals some attribute of God (such as His grace), or some mighty act (such as His creating the universe). As the service unfolds, we are able to respond to this revelation through singing, prayer, and other acts. The dynamic of revelation and response is a means by which we tell God’s story.

Implications

- Worship is something that is not centered on us and our experience of God, but as something much bigger and God-centric in which we engage.
- Worship spans both universe/world/creation as well as eternity/time/history. Worship is an eternal on-going act. So when we gather, we join with all creation, as well as with the Church around the world and the historical Church that came before us, in glorifying God.

- We are brought together by our redemption stories, which are mysteriously intertwined through our community, and through God's saving grace. This is another reason why corporate worship is an essential part of the Christian faith. When I gather with others with whom I know and am known, I know their story, and I am reminded of how their story is entwined with mine, and enfolded into God's larger story. Our definition of the Church changes and enriches when we understand this concept.
- Finally, the content of our worship is vitally important. The depth of the Truth we express becomes paramount. If our worship is an act of re-telling, then it affects the forms of our worship on a Sunday morning. We understand the importance of Gathering, Acts of Praise, the Service of the Word, the Service of the Table, and Sending. [More on this in later discussions.]

Question for Discussion

We mentioned the Call To Worship as one means by which we tell God's story. In what other ways do we celebrate and "rehearse" God's story in our worship?

In light of the dynamic of revelation and response, how do you see the role of singing worship songs? Do you typically sing during our worship? Why or why not?

PART 3: TRIUNE WORSHIP

The Nature of God

There is only one God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three eternal Persons, the same in substance but distinct. God is the Father (John 6, Eph 4:6), the Son (Matt 3:17, Heb 1), and the Spirit (Acts 2). The three Persons of the Trinity are associated equally and as one (Matt 28:19, 2 Cor 13:14). God exists in community. In other words, He is complete and perfect in and of Himself.

Each of the three Persons of the Godhead have unique identities. The Father is our Abba, our Daddy God. It is the Father who sent His Son, and it is through the Son that we become children of the Father. Jesus is our Savior, the perfect Lamb, who came to earth in flesh to die on the cross and be raised from the tomb on our behalf. Through Him all things were made. Those who trust in Him make Him our Lord, and we become His disciples. And in fact, we do not know God outside of the person of Jesus (Heb 1:1). The Holy Spirit is our Teacher, Guide, Comforter, and Empowerer, and it is in cooperation with the Spirit that we are transformed.

The three Persons of the Godhead exist in an ever-joyful, ever-creative Community. And worship is an invitation into community. More specifically, it is an invitation to us as God's people to enter into the on-going community of the Trinity. In other words, God exists in perfect and eternal Community, and through His grace, He invites us into community when we gather in worship. So there is this invitation and interaction, both vertical and horizontal, of community in corporate worship.

The nature of God is a mystery. In other words, His nature is beyond our human capacity to understand, outside what He has revealed to us.

Implications

- In corporate worship, our gathering mirrors God's Community, and we are intended to commune with one another in worship, to encourage and love one another toward worship. Worship is not merely a collective of individual experiences, but more so a communing of God with His people, the Bride of Christ. This is a subtle but extremely important distinction.
- Also, as stated in "Part 2: God's Story," the act of worship is eternal and on-going. So as we are invited into community, we enter into what is already ongoing and perfect and good. This takes the burden off of us to come in any state of goodness or sincerity. We simply come as we are, and God accepts us in our broken state to worship.
- So at the beginning of our services—during the *Gathering* Movement—we are to remind ourselves that we join in the community of the Godhead as well as the community of the Saints.
- Unfortunately, much of contemporary worship is not Triune in nature, in the sense that we celebrate the community of the Godhead. We must strive for a fuller expression of corporate worship which engages all three Persons of the Trinity.

Question for Discussion

How do we model and express worship of the Triune God in our services? (e.g., Call To Worship, worship songs, sermon, sacraments, etc.)

The Nicene Creed is a statement of belief formulated by the early church as a means of correcting and teaching essential Christian doctrine. In a sense, it was a yardstick to help the early church know what was true. Since its initial adoption in 325 AD, it is accepted as that which defines the Christian faith, from western and east orthodox churches to the modern Christian church today. As an exercise in Triune worship, recite the Nicene Creed located below.

Nicene Creed

"I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.”

PART 4: THE CHURCH GATHERED

Five minutes late, coffee and childcare bracelets in hand: The Church Gathered...

One of the fundamental beliefs about worship is that we don't worship solely as individuals, but that we enter into God's story most fully when we enter it in community. We are a people, brought together by our baptism and our communion; we have been made into one entity, the rescued children of God. The Church, the Bride of Christ, is not an individual or even a great number of individuals each finding God on their own. The church in its very essence and nature is a community. And we are that community. And thus, as we are gathered, we are more of ourselves than when we are separate.

Just as in a healthy family, there is a profound joy that is created when all the members come together in our diversity around a big dinner table. When we are together, we can understand ourselves more completely, enjoy our existence more fully, and better celebrate the story of what God has made in this family. This idea of the essential nature of community didn't originate with the church or even with the family, but comes straight from the essence of our Trinitarian God, who is in his very being a Community of Love.

Consider Hebrew worship in the Old Testament. The covenant God had made with man was not strictly with individuals (like Abraham) but more fully realized with His people (the descendants of Abraham). Thus, the Hebrews saw themselves primarily as a part of a greater whole—one of God's people. This is confirmed in the New Testament, as we are all considered a part of one body (1 Cor 12:12-30), as the Bride of Christ (Eph 5:32, Rev 21:9-10). Indeed, the idea that faith is a strictly individual thing is a westernized view influenced by modernism. In essence, the Christian faith is a communal act.

Our gathering then acknowledges two essential facts of our theology: that we are entering into the on-going worship of our Triune God, who invites us as a community into His Community; and that we are, at our core, all members of His redeemed community. Thus, our gathering brings us definition, identity, and purpose.

The Rest of our Week: The Church Sent...

Every service also includes a *Sending* Movement (See Part 1: First Things First). We exist not only as a “called-in” community, but also as one sent out in mission, to witness and work for his redemptive power and justice in the lives and communities where we live. We find the power and purpose of this sending through the greater community and through the story we enter into in our worship services.

While the Sending portion of our service might be short (e.g., the Benediction), we consider this the beginning of the rest of our week. So in essence, the Sending marks the beginning to the

other six days of the week. So our sending will often come with a challenge or a call to commitment.

Implications

- As we begin our services, we acknowledge we are being called into a worship that is already on-going and full of glory. Thus, while it is important to be prepared to worship, our individual thoughts and intentions are not as important to the worship as what God is doing in the universe. God's actions in history and God's community of love are the more powerful realities we enter into and truths that define our worship and our very existence. We believe worshipping with this community, in this space and time, is how we experience and know the story of God for our time in history.
- Our gathering—the architecture and interior artistry of our sanctuary, our call to worship and invocation and the gathering songs of praise or other artistic forms—serve to bring us (body, mind, and emotions) into the reality that already is. This is why we work diligently on the different aspects of our gathering, e.g., flow, lyrical content, prayer content, ambience and sacred space, etc.
- The gathering empowers us to be sent out to bring in others into this community and to see this story more fully realized in our world in the in-between time.

Questions for Discussion

How do you personally prepare for worship? Or do you even consider that preparation is necessary?

How do you think of those who are worshipping around you? Do you see yourself as part of a community, or do you basically consider worship to be primarily a personal act?

What does it mean to understand that the community of faith *where you are* is where you will experience and know God? Does that threaten us at all or make us uncomfortable?

In light of the idea that the Sending Movement of a service is a beginning of something, and not the end of the service, how does that make you think differently about the Benediction?

PART 5: ENGAGEMENT WITH HEART, MIND, AND BODY

A Two Way Street

Worship is dialogical. And this dialogue can be seen as a continuing cycle of *revelation* and *response*. God reveals Himself through His attributes, His mighty acts, and His Holy Spirit, and then we respond in celebration, stillness, prayer, conviction, and gratitude. This dialog can happen when we watch the stars on a cloudless night, or when we read Scripture or sing in our services, or whenever we tell the story of God.

What does our response look like? Moses instructed the Israelites to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,” (Deut 6:5) and Jesus

punctuated this Scripture by adding, “This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matt 22:38). In other words, we are to respond to God in worship with every fiber of our being. But there is some confusion as to what that means.

What does “Heart” mean anyway?

The heart of the worshiper is a key aspect to the worship experience, but there is some disagreement about what that means. For many, this essentially means that a valid emotional response must occur, which places the emphasis on emotion, experience, and sincerity. Unfortunately, worship that is dependent on our efforts toward sincerity can sometimes be manipulated and programmed. We’ve all seen “rah rah” moments when emotions can get whipped up for sporting events, school assemblies, and even infomercials. More importantly, this emphasis can disregard foundational issues of obedience and faithfulness, i.e., living the life of a worshiper rather than simply having experiences of worship.

But if we think of the heart in its fuller and more biblical meaning—as the core of an individual “where decisions and choices are made for the whole person” (*Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard)—then a worshiping heart can be seen as one that worships as an act of the will, rather than simply as an emotion. Of course, our emotions are critical in worship. But God is worthy of worship regardless of how we feel.

Think about loving your spouse. Certainly love is an emotion, but faithfulness redefines love to be much more than that. It is also an act of the will, an act of selflessness, something you express even when you *don’t* feel like it.

So when we bring this greater sense of purpose to worship, it doesn’t matter if we are “in the mood,” or if it is the style or song we prefer. All of that becomes subservient to the purpose of meeting God and fully responding to his action and presence in our lives. This is a subtle but important distinction. Instead of revving ourselves up emotionally for a worship experience, we instead *choose* to worship—assuming an internal posture of obedience and surrender—as an act of our will, and then allow the Holy Spirit to move us emotionally.

That is not to say that emotions aren’t important. They are. But emotions follow the will, not the other way around.

Worshiping with the Other Parts: Mind and Body

The passages in Deuteronomy and Matthew listed above aren’t meant to be an anatomy lesson, describing heart, soul, and strength as discrete parts of a person. These human aspects are much more interconnected and blurred than that. That being said, we can safely assume that Jesus meant for us to love God also with our minds and our bodies.

So what does it mean to worship with our minds, our intellects? In “Part 2: God’s Story,” we discussed the foundational importance of telling God’s story in worship. This is not possible without engaging one’s intellect in the process of remembering, relating, and responding to God’s revelation. This is why we use responsive readings, read Scripture aloud, study the Bible in the sermon, and choose songs with more lyrical depth and integrity—we engage our minds as we develop a greater understanding of God’s attributes, ways, and story. We also must do the hard work of understanding ourselves as we go through the process of spiritual transformation. And sometimes, this is a stretch for people.

Worshiping with one's body is another uncomfortable stretch for many. The Bible describes many bodily forms of corporate worship: singing, shouting, clapping, stillness, hand raising, dancing, drumming (insert your own drummer joke here), bowing, etc. Obviously, the body plays a physical role in interacting with God in worship. Often, we hear people say something to the effect of, "well, I didn't feel like raising my hands, and I would be feel like I'm faking if I do." We would argue, however, that God is *worthy* of lifting our hands, whether we *feel* like it or not. As we stated above, worship is not primarily an issue of *feeling* but of *choosing*. This is why we encourage everyone to choose to raise hands in anticipation, to clap with joy, to sing with abandon, and to kneel with reverence—for God is worthy, regardless of our comfort level in that bodily expression. And often times, our emotions will follow our wills.

Implications

- When we see worship as a dialogue, an interaction between the divine and humanity, the eternal and the temporal, the Holy God and His people, we begin to see it as the transcendent and mysterious and holy act that it is.
- Understanding that worship is a *whole person* activity really should change how we approach a Sunday morning. Rather than simply be spectators of worship, we should come prepared to fully *engage* our intellects, our emotions, and our bodies in the entirety of the service.
- Worship begins as an act of the will, an act of obedience and surrender that allows God to have control of our lives (Romans 12:1). When we come before God and engage in dialogue with all we are, worship becomes an act of the will that unites and engages all aspects of our personhood: our intellect, body, emotions, history, and unique personality.

Question for Discussion

- When you are in corporate worship, are you aware of the dialogue (revelation and response) that flows, not only horizontally (between you and others, the worship leaders, and the pastor) but vertically (with God)?
- Where is the "stretch" for you in worship? Is it in using your body? Is it in your emotions? Paying attention to words and their meaning? Where do you need to work on greater engagement with God in worship?
- If heartfelt worship were merely about feelings, how about when you don't "feel" like going to church? Or you don't "feel" like raising your hands? Or you don't "feel" like giving to the offering? How would it look if you became a *whole person* worshiper?

PART 6: SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

What is a Sacrament?

A sacrament can be defined as a public and corporate act of inward and spiritual grace. There are two specific sacraments that were instituted by Jesus during his earthly ministry: Baptism

(Matthew 28:18-20) and the Eucharist, or as we know it, the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23-26). These are the two sacraments that we acknowledge at Oak Hills.

Many Christian traditions have different theological stances to these sacraments, and some will even add additional sacraments to their lists. This study is not intended to go into the many traditions, but rather simply explain our theology.

At Oak Hills, we believe that in both the act of the Lord's Supper and in the act of Baptism, Christ is real and present with us in some mysterious way, and the outward symbol or experience transcends our understanding, affording us some inward grace. More than just symbols, God works through the waters of baptism, as well as the bread and cup of the Lord's Table, to extend His real presence and grace to us.

In a larger sense, any public act in which we encounter the very real presence of Christ, can be considered "sacramental." Thus, the candles we light during Advent and Holy Week to symbolize the coming of the light into the world, palm fronds on Palm Sunday, foot washings at special services and retreats, and anointing services for the healing of the sick can all be considered sacramental. But we make a literal distinction between something that is "sacramental" and the actual "sacraments" of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Remember that we have stated that one of our primary functions as worship leaders is to tell God's story. All of these acts serve to once again retell the Story of God, the meta-narrative, which is our goal in corporate worship.

In both of these sacraments, very common physical objects and acts become vessels of transcendence and holiness. In this they are small representations of the Incarnation—the incredible reality that the transcendent Word, presence and person of God became a man, with a body of capillaries and bone, who lived, and ate food and washed his body and worshipped in a building and came to know himself in a particular family, community and group of friends—just as we do.

Implications

- Celebrating the sacraments has been a part of corporate worship since the beginning of the church. Thus, when we celebrate Baptism or the Eucharist, we not only celebrate the present moment between God and His people, but we also tie ourselves to the believers and martyrs of historical Church, who celebrated these acts for two millennia.

We believe something transcendent occurs when we go under the baptismal waters and when we take the communion elements, because we know that Eternal Holiness did enter once and forever into this earthly, fleshly world as a human baby. So this world's story has been claimed by Him. And as we practice the sacraments in their incarnational power, we know one day all our bodies and all of this world and its long history will be restored forever for his Holy purposes.

- Sacraments are heavy in symbol and metaphorical language. There is a poetry to the act of communion, as Jesus explains a deep and profound mystery with ordinary table items. The arts take on a more substantive role in worship when we understand that symbol and metaphor are a part of the artistic language (More on this in Part 7: The Arts and Worship).

- Some churches believe that the sacraments are simply symbols, and that there is no special outpouring of God in these events. Others believe that the outpouring is not only special and

evident, but also physically manifest (e.g., Catholic theology). We are more in the middle, acknowledging the unique outpouring of God beyond mere symbol, but not to the degree that we can define it or find it physically manifested.

Question for Discussion

- Share an experience of sacramental worship that meant a lot to you. Why was it significant?
- If you have not yet been baptized, why not? Would you consider it? What is stopping you? If you have been baptized, what factored into your decision?
- What is your experience of the Lord's Supper? Do you feel that God meets you in the bread and cup? How?

PART 7: THE ARTS IN WORSHIP

Who Art in Heaven

If you've been at Oak Hills for any length of time, you realize that the arts are an important expression of our Kingdom life. But maybe you don't quite understand why.

Consider the poetic, artistic way in which Jesus, during His earthly ministry, spoke to us. Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven was like treasure hidden in a field, and like a merchant looking for fine pearls, and like a very tiny mustard seed. He warned us of the plank in our own eyes, the wolves in sheep's clothing, and the house built on sand. He called us salt and He called us light. Madeleine L'Engle states, "Jesus was not a theologian. He was God who told stories."

And in the most artistic action of Jesus' ministry, he shares a meal with His closest friends. But in doing so He completely recasts the symbolic, reverent act of the Passover meal into what we now know as the Lord's Supper. The sacred act of the Passover, intended to commemorate the most significant event in the history of the people of God, is suddenly redeemed in the foreshadowing act of this last meal. The bread is His body; the wine is His blood. Through the vehicle of the Table, Jesus reveals the tenor of His great and profound and mysterious grace to us.

In the first five words of the Bible, God defines Himself as the eternal Artist God (Genesis 1:1). And as we are made in the image of God, we are gifted with the ability to create and design and compose. God commissions us through the cultural mandate (Genesis 1:26-28, 2:19-20) to care for and steward the earth, and this includes the act of creation. The arts are a part of this commission, an essential expression of our faith.

The arts allow us to express that which cannot be expressed with mere words. Art also helps us convey a sense of beauty, which in essence is a type of Truth that ultimately points to God the Creator. And as God's children, our artistic expressions can put a smile on God's face, in the same way that our children's crayon art find their way onto our refrigerator doors.

The Christian church has historically used the arts, which were effective means for communicating to the illiterate laity of the day. Stained glass, for example, told the Gospel

stories in streaming color. Tapestries, murals, and statues also gave the people a deeper understanding of the Bible, which was unavailable to the masses.

Art in the Church Today

Unfortunately, the modern evangelical church is still suffering from a hangover from the reformation as it relates to the arts. We at Oak Hills intend to be a catalyst to reclaim the arts in the church and to the world. This is evidenced in many of our arts events, art gallery, arts camp, concerts, and yearly conference.

In our church services, the arts are expressed in many ways as well. Music is the most obvious, and we use music extensively (and in diverse ways) in our worship. But the arts are also conveyed in other ways, such as our liturgies, which are largely original compositions by people in our own church. We also use feature songs, videos, our art gallery, occasional drama sketches, stage decor (see more on this in Part 8: Time Redeemed) and other expressions. The arts are a powerful means upon which we tell the Story of God.

Implications

- If we can please God through the expressions of the arts (in the same way a parent is pleased by their child's crayon art), then the arts are a means not only of expressing our faith, but also a means of glorifying God. Art then can be in and of itself an act of worship.
- Excellence is another aspect of the expression of the arts. God deserves excellence, not only because He is worthy, but also because it is an issue of first fruits. (Note: We don't pursue excellence in an effort to impress God. We realize that is impossible. At Oak Hills, excellence is defined as doing the best you can with what God gives you.) We strive to give God the best of our artistic expressions, for His glory.

Questions

- Share a time when you were deeply moved by the arts. It could be a movie you saw, a book you read, or a painting you saw. What was it about it that moved you? Why?
- Now share a moment from a church service when God moved you through the arts. What was your experience? How did God meet you through that artistic expression?

PART 8: TIME REDEEMED: THE CHURCH CALENDAR

How We Measure Time

How we measure our days and set our calendar reveals how we define ourselves. We measure time through the yearly cycling of Back-to-School, Christmas, Spring Break and Summer Vacation. We also feel the passage of time through life's milestones and through the growth of our children. Maybe we chart our year through the calendar of sports seasons or perhaps we tend to measure time by the various shopping seasons, quarters of the fiscal year or the seasons of harvest. The calendars that mark our years both reveal and create the priorities and undergird the story of our lives.

The church has its own calendar, set by the ancient church—with its roots in the Jewish holidays and even more fundamentally in the story of God’s redemption of his people through Jesus Christ (see our discussion on the meta-narrative in Part 2). This calendar includes seasons of waiting, fasting, seeking and preparing (Advent and Lent), lengthy holidays of celebrating God’s redemption through Christ’s incarnation and resurrection (Christmas and Easter), and days that remind us of God’s empowering mission to bring others into his Kingdom (Epiphany and Pentecost).

In the midst of this cycle, Holy Week stands out as central, unique and intense. But the church calendar also includes, like our lives, short and long stretches of “Ordinary Time,” when we are counting through our days, entrusting God to meet us in the mundane. Through the cycling of these stories we make our identity and our lives intertwined with the redemptive story of God and learn to see this same story unfolding in our times and places.

At Oak Hills, we have adopted the use of the ancient church calendar in a very basic form for all of these reasons. Now some might question this approach. But the truth of the matter is that all churches have some sort of calendar cycle, whether they know it or not. Churches celebrate Mother’s and Father’s Day, Memorial Day, and the Fourth of July, appropriating these secular (and somewhat manufactured) holidays into the life of their churches. At Oak Hills, we are purposeful in adopting a calendar with spiritual significance, and as we do so, we define ourselves according to God’s Meta-Narrative.

Space Redeemed

As our use of the church calendar demonstrates, our theology has ramifications that reverberate throughout our life. Similarly, at Oak Hills we seek to make our physical surroundings a reflection God’s Truth. Just as we believe how we measure our days changes how we live in them, we believe the way we fashion our physical surroundings can orient us to God’s presence. For this reason, we use our sacred space to focus on God’s redemptive story. Using the context where we find ourselves, including but not limited to our auditorium, we work to make our space reflect his beauty and majesty and creative artistry. We also seek to have artistic representations of the Biblical story, because we need to be reminded of God’s story, and because we long to retell this story of Incarnation and Redemption for every culture, time and place on earth. And occasionally, we will have services in the round, to emphasize both the Lord’s Table, and the community of God that encircles it.

Of course, the practical aspect of this is that our main worship space is also a multi-purpose room. Our auditorium is filled throughout the week with basketball players, performance artists, youth groups, and other activities. But this too is the church, and we endeavor to serve God and one another in our auditorium.

Implications

- The church calendar provides the means by which families and individuals, as well as the entire community, can embrace a redeemed yearly cycle that invites us through its markers into God’s redemption.
- Following the church calendar is a spiritual discipline or tool. It allows us another way to put ourselves into the channels of God’s grace and love. It doesn’t matter how spiritually mature we are, the Church calendar continually offers us a chance to enter into God’s story.

- We can recognize and experience the Calendar through signifying colors, and other artistic representations and decoration, through corporate fasting and feasting, and through special services, music and poetry. We use the colors of the church calendar to remind us of how God's eternal story has entered into our life's seasons. For example, green signifies Ordinary Time, purple signifies Advent, blue signifies Easter. There is nothing particularly special about the colors per se; however, we have decided to adopt these colors to further establish the calendar as well as tie into the historicity of the church calendar.

- In our sacred space, we continually seek tangible, physical ways to orient our senses on God's presence and transforming truth. Thus, the communion table is central because it represents Jesus redeeming gift of himself. Similarly, through a lowered stage, through the stage dressing and decoration, and even more in our times of worship "in the round," we focus on the centrality of God's presence in our redeemed community. We are the church, more than any presentation or performance.

Questions for Discussion

What are some of the "calendars" you use to define your days? How familiar are you with the church calendar?

Take some time to imagine what a deeper embracing of the church calendar might look like in your life.

What kinds of spaces feel or have felt "holy" to you? Why?

PART 9: WORSHIP AND JUSTICE

Seeking Justice

Jesus, along with Scripture, linked worship and justice when he taught that the Great Commandment, "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength," was related to the Golden Rule, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:36-40). Clearly, a life of worship—loving God with all of our self—is a life that is concerned with the needs and struggles of our neighbor.

As God's people, we are to love God with the entirety of our being—our heart, mind, soul and strength—focused on his goodness and glory. Entering into God's story, embracing and responding to his work in history and in our lives, will naturally have immense implications in our own selves and in our community. Our minds and hearts are transformed. As Dallas Willard says in *Renovation of the Heart*, "Worship is the single most powerful force in completing and sustaining restoration in the whole person." And as we are transformed, all our relationships will naturally be affected. Immersed in the truth and reality of his story, we will become active participants in God's redemptive story for our time and place. A worshipping life works for justice. If we are pursuing the depths of God we must pursue the cries for justice from our neighbor.

Justice is defined as a use of power in accordance with the nature of God. In other words, justice is power that is used to bring love and goodness and redemption to those with less power, rather than harm, abuse, neglect.

Isaiah echoes the prophets and Jesus himself when he wrote:

“When you come to appear before me [says the LORD], who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” (Isaiah 1:12-17).

Worship requires a heart that is aligned with God’s heart. Worship that doesn’t include a transformation of our relationships—and worship that doesn’t include justice-making love and peace—is rejected by God as false and self-focused. The Great Commandment is always linked with the Golden Rule, instructing us to love our neighbor as ourselves, because God’s Kingdom and His story is at its essence a story of justice and of redemption.

Now we cannot bring about justice and peace on earth in our relationships by our own striving and effort. Rather, through worship, we are immersed in the presence and wondrous goodness of God, and we will take on his vision, strength and purpose for our world. And we can be sure that vision, strength and purpose involves transforming systems of injustice and violence into communities of justice and shalom.

We know this because of the nature of the character and Story of God. He cares for the poor. He feeds the hungry. He heals the crippled. He seeks the lost. He befriends sinners. He sends his servants to the streets, inviting in the rag tag street folk to his great party. And He asks us to do the same.

Implications

- We are transformed and empowered by worship because of the worthiness of God and because the nature of his kingdom is one of justice-making love.
- Our worship services should remind us and immerse us in the redemptive, justice-filled story of God—a story that cares profoundly for our individual lives but is never solely for our individual comfort, entertainment or edification. This is why justice-related issues continually permeate the many activities of our church and elements in our worship services.
- In our worship, we will remind ourselves of how God looks at the world. We will see the injustices. We will pay attention to things like communities without clean water or reliable health care, children without safe homes, systems that provide no opportunities for people to work to support their families. And we will grow in a vision for what God desires in these situations. We will begin to pray and plead and work for justice because we know that is where God is and what he is doing. As an outgrowth of our worship, we will find ways to dig wells, provide foster homes, and fill food banks because we worship a God who will not allow us to ignore injustice and who empowers us to fulfill his purposes.

- Our four-fold movement of worship always include a *Sending* (see Part 4: The Church Gathered). This is where we are sent out in the power, purpose and vision of God to bring about his Kingdom's reign in our world.

Questions for Discussion

Do you recall a time when you understood more deeply the linkage between justice and worship?

Why do you think that God rejects worship that is not undergirded by a heart for justice? What do you perceive as possible dangers when we separate justice and worship?

What might a commitment to pursuing justice look like in the content, form and style of our worship services?

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