

LET US

WHY WE
WORSHIP
THE WAY
WE DO

WORSHIP



GOD

DEREK W.H.
THOMAS

“I do not know a more reliable guide to biblical worship than Derek Thomas, a friend and former colleague who has taught me so much over the years. This book epitomizes his writings—rich, yet readable. Practical, but full of biblical and theological insight. I plan to recommend this book to anyone who wants to know why we at our church are committed to historic, Reformed worship.”

—DR. WILLIAM BARCLEY
Senior pastor, Sovereign Grace Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, N.C.

“John Calvin said, ‘The first foundation of righteousness is the worship of God.’ While each Reformed denomination has its particular manner of worship with regard to various details, Derek Thomas offers a lively introduction to several principles and practices of classic Reformed worship. This book will prove very helpful to church members and visitors.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE
President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Mich.

“Derek Thomas writes to an important audience: traditional churches whose members don’t know why they worship as they do, and new members of traditional churches who don’t know why their newfound church home worships as it does. Thomas provides a brief but comprehensive explanation of historic Reformed worship, beginning with the doctrine of the church, the role of the Christian Sabbath, and the regulative principle. He then provides a guided tour through each element of worship from the reading and preaching of God’s Word, to the collection, to prayer, to creeds, to sung praises, to the administration

of the sacraments, and finally to the benediction. For those looking for a succinct explanation of historic Reformed worship, here is a guide that you can place in the hands of inquirers, whether they've been sitting in the pews for decades or are newly arrived."

—DR. TERRY JOHNSON
Senior minister, Independent Presbyterian Church
Savannah, Ga.

"God is to be praised as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. So why did God create us? To the praise of His glory. Why does He save us? To the praise of His glorious grace. Why does God providentially sustain us? 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!' Derek Thomas has provided for us a biblical and focused, straightforward distillation of the primacy of God-centered, Spirit-filled, Christ-exalting, biblically revealed, and gospel-saturated worship that is pleasing to the One who created, saved, and sustains us so that we may give the triune God true worship. The God of glory is to be worshiped rightly in Spirit and truth. This volume is a page-turner for all who once fell short of His glory and now have no greater desire than to give Him glory when gathered with His people and when scattered to exalt Him in all of life.

—DR. HARRY REEDER III
Senior pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church
Birmingham, Ala.

Let Us Worship God

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Why We Worship the Way We Do

DEREK W.H. THOMAS



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To
the members and friends
of First Presbyterian Church,
Columbia, South Carolina,
and
Dr. David Lockington

Contents

Preface.....	1
1 The <i>Local Church</i>	5
2 Keeping Sunday Special	21
3 The Regulative Principle	31
4 Liturgy-Lite.....	41
5 Scripture, Scripture, and <i>More</i> Scripture	49
6 The Offering.....	61
7 Prayer	71
8 Creeds: What Do You Believe?	79
9 Music: Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs	95
10 Baptism.....	107
11 The Lord's Supper	117
12 The Benediction.....	129
Appendix	137
Notes.....	141
Subject Index.....	151
Scripture Index	159
About the Author.....	165

Preface

“Let us worship God!”

Whenever I say these words on a Sunday morning, something supernatural occurs. In Jesus’ own words: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt. 18:20). Think of it! Jesus comes and joins in our worship. He brings us His Word, His promise, His encouragement. He sings with us (Heb. 2:12). How vital, therefore, that we worship in a manner He prescribes!

These pages arose out of a need to explain to my congregation (First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.) why it is that we worship the way we do. First Presbyterian is more than 225 years old, and in its long and profound history, it has maintained a manner of worship that today we would refer to as “historic” or “classical.” While we easily grow accustomed to doing things a certain way and therefore refer to it as “traditional,” new members (who join because of the preaching more than any other factor) often ask why we do or don’t do such and such. Typically, I address this in the inquirers class that is designed for new members. But I also became aware that while no discontent was evident among long-standing members, there was little by way of a theological understanding as to why we worship in the manner that we do. Hence, I preached a series of sermons that formed the substance of these pages. Sermons and books are very different things, and these pages are weightier than the sermons that underpin them.

LET US WORSHIP GOD

Initially, I thought of writing this book simply for our own members, but I have been persuaded that its contents will have value beyond our own church. I have tried not to be overly critical of other traditions. My aim was a more positive one: to provide theological and scriptural support for the liturgical aspects of our corporate worship.

The sermons were preached before the pandemic of 2020, but the book was largely assembled during the chaos that COVID-19 brought upon the church worldwide. At one point, gathered, in-person worship ceased for fifteen weeks and we learned the value of livestreaming. Even now, as I write these words, only 35 percent of our typical attendance has returned. We have learned the blessings and curses of Zoom! But one vital lesson has emerged: gathered worship on the Lord's Day is a vital part of our Christian life. We have renewed empathy for our brothers and sisters who live in parts of the world where gathered worship may cost them their lives and for whom our experience in 2020 was a very small window into what they experience all their lives.

There are many people to thank, not least my dear friends who encouraged me to write this book, especially my colleague in preaching, Dr. Gabe Fluhrer, whose constant words of encouragement to write have been a source of great comfort. I am also thankful for Bill and Nancy Neely, whose generosity in allowing me to stay in their beach home in Litchfield, S.C., while writing the final pages of this book proved a little taste of heaven. I am also blessed to have an exceptionally smart intern, Beck Otersen, and his savvy work is evident in the formatting of many of the footnotes. Most of all, I am grateful to my long-suffering wife, Rosemary, without whom not a word of it would have been written. As we traverse our fifth decade

PREFACE

of marriage together, I am more grateful each day for the bride the Lord gave me.

This book was written with the wonderful congregation of First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C., in mind. It has been the greatest privilege of my ministry to serve the church as their senior minister. I dedicate this book to all the members and friends of this extraordinary church and count myself blessed to know and serve them.

I also want to dedicate it to my wonderful son-in-law, David Lockington, and ask his forgiveness for the chapter about inclusive, accompanied psalm singing! (He will understand.) I cannot imagine a better father to my two grandchildren, and I count it a blessed day when my daughter introduced him to us two decades ago.

Now, turn the page and start reading. I hope this book will make your Sunday worship even more meaningful.

Derek W.H. Thomas
October 2020

The *Local Church*

Jesus only has one plan, and it's called *church!* "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18).

The author of Hebrews exhorts his readers, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb. 10:24–25).

Christians are meant to assemble together, especially on the Lord's Day. They are meant to worship *together*. Theologians speak of the "visible" church: the church that is made up of all those who profess to be Christians. Paedobaptists include children in this definition. The point is its *visibility*. It is not a secret society. It has a certain structure. It is made up of people who believe certain truths and live out a certain lifestyle. They do things together in a manner that is purposeful and sets them apart. And one important reason for a visible assembling of God's people is to worship God in a manner prescribed by Scripture.

During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 when churches across the entire world "shut down," they didn't cease to be visible churches. Churches are not defined by buildings. Meeting online may be irregular, but it is not illegal. The author of Hebrews hardly envisaged the

internet, but virtual worship in seasons of extremity do meet many of the objectives of worship.

The purpose of this book is to examine the nature of this collective, corporate worship. The church exists for other purposes—to evangelize or provide service in and for the community, for example. But its primary purpose is to worship the true and living God.

The New Testament church emerged as a consequence of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Some speculate as to whether Jesus intended to create a visible church, but that seems totally contrary to Scripture, especially to the words of Jesus.

A key text is Matthew 16:13–20. Jesus and the disciples were in Caesarea Philippi and were discussing what people were saying about His identity. Some thought He was John the Baptist raised from the dead. Others opined that He may be Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. And then Peter had a defining moment in which he confessed Jesus to be the “Christ, the Son of the living God.” It is clear that the confession arose due to a revelation given to him by the Father in heaven. Playing on the similarity of Peter’s name and the Greek word for “rock,” Jesus responded: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (vv. 18–19). Several issues need underlining.

First, without getting embroiled in fanciful Roman Catholic claims that Peter is the first pope, it is clear that Peter is being given a primary role in the establishment of the New Testament church. The first section of the book of Acts is about Peter’s role after Pentecost while Paul is still a hostile Jewish assassin. Peter—broken and

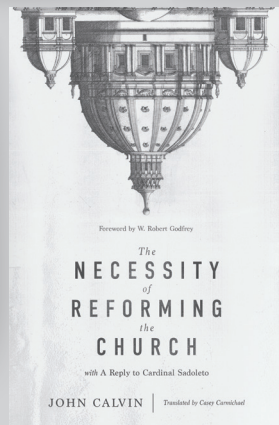
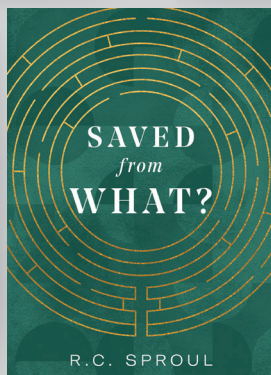
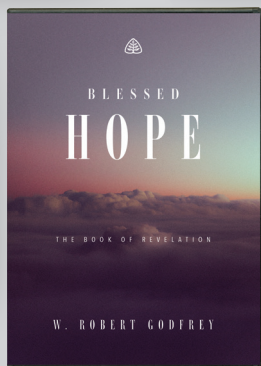
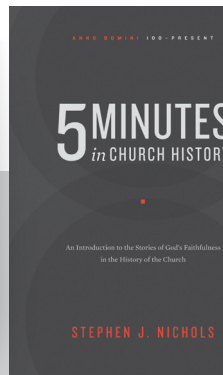
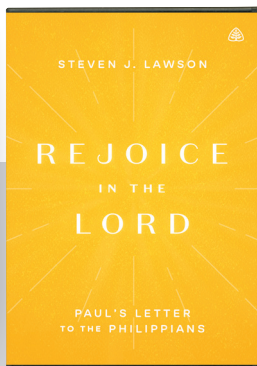
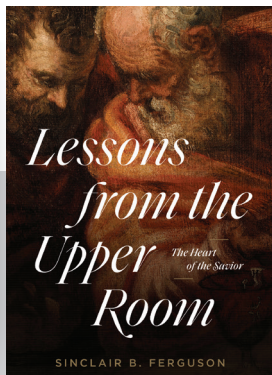
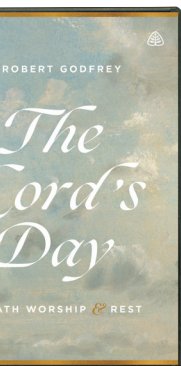
fragile as he was—is the one Jesus chooses. That in itself should encourage us.

Second, Jesus refers to the church as “*my* church.” Pastors frequently talk about their churches, often to boast about the size of the membership or the budget. In doing so, they often use the words “my church is . . .” But it is not “my” church; it is Jesus’ church. He is King and Head of the church. “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22–23). As Lord of the church, Jesus alone dictates what the church does. He establishes the program. He sets the agenda. And, as we shall see, this is vitally important when answering the question, *How* should we worship?

Third, this is the first time Jesus employs the word “church” (Greek *ekklēsia*). Up to this point, Jesus spoke about “kingdom” (“the kingdom of God” or, especially in Matthew, “the kingdom of heaven”), but never once had He talked about “church.” And yet, none of the disciples asked Him what the word meant! Obviously, they had some basic understanding of the word. And, by the time Matthew wrote his gospel a generation later, his readers knew all too well what the word meant, and therefore Matthew does not stop to give an explanation. The word *ekklēsia* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for “assembly” or “congregation” (*qahal*) in the Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (or LXX, the Roman numerals for seventy after the tradition that seventy Jewish rabbis were involved in its translation). The word *qahal* suggests a people “called” together for the purpose of communion with God.

The same idea of gathering lies behind the term *synagogue*. Jesus was telling Peter that His people will meet together in fellowship with God and in fellowship with one another. And, as Peter

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