

# Rhythms of Grace: Three Reflections on Worship

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Do you find yourself in God's gospel story week to week?

How does the gospel inform worship?

What should we include and exclude in our Sunday morning services?

These are just a couple of the questions Mike Cospers answers in his book, [\*Rhythms of Grace: How the Church's Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel\*](#). Written by a pastor who has led music in the church for decades, his book is fantastic for all worshipers in the church. In what follows, we will share three points about worship from his illuminating book.

## 1. Worship Fills the Whole Bible

First, Cospers shares a biblical theology of worship. In chapters 1–4, he starts at the beginning (well, actually, before the beginning), with God in perfect, trinitarian love. At its heart, God's own self-adoration is perfectly worshipful (see John 17).

Then, in creation, God's worship is shared with his image-bearers, as it overflows to Adam, God's first "worship leader." Eden was itself a garden-temple where God dwelt in the presence of Adam and Eve. We should not suppose Adam and Eve's worship was ritualistic, endless singing; it involved their whole lives as devoted to God. They were called to subdue the earth and expand the garden for God's glory. Sadly, they failed in their mission and perfect worship was ruined.

This fall into sin introduces the next stage in the biblical story. Because sin distorts the beauty and harmony God created, man would now bow down before idols instead of God (see Romans 1:18–25). In truth, humanity did not stop worshiping when they lost Eden; they simply worshiped everything but their Creator.

The rest of the Bible tells how God would recover his praise and create true worshipers. First, with Abraham and the patriarchs. Then, with Moses God established a pattern of praise in Israel. The Exodus is the first place we find God's people singing praise for God's redemption (Exodus 15). Then, at Mount Sinai, God gave Israel a system of priests and sacrifices to approach God's throne in worship. All in all, the Old Testament is the foundation on which New Testament worship is built.

This foundation is one that brings us to Christ and the worship he leads.

## 2. Worship Has One Goal, Two Settings, and Three Audiences

Next, *Rhythms of Grace* offers a simple and memorable philosophy of worship. Acknowledging the God-given diversity found in churches, Cosper provides a biblical way to consider how worship has one object, two contexts, and three audiences.

*First, the Trinitarian God is at the center of true worship.* He created us to worship him and now in Christ God has redeemed us and sanctified us, so that our lives can glorify him. God is the *One* who has directed his sovereign plan to bring praise from all nations to his throne, and thus he deserves preeminence in our worship. This is the one goal of worship.

*Second, two contexts exist for our worship—one that is scattered, one that is gathered.* Scattered worship is how every Christian worships God in every moment of their life, whether in private or in public. It is important to note that scattered worship is a blessing of the new covenant and not something Israel enjoyed. The fact that we can worship God while driving our car is a huge deal, and one we should be thankful for!

At the same time, we cannot sustain our worship alone. Made alive by the Spirit, we are created for community. This is where gathered worship comes in. Jesus is the cornerstone of his temple and we become God's dwelling place when gather to worship him together. Therefore, this makes Sunday's gathering both unique and necessary. As living stones we gather with other living stones to form—if only for an hour or two—a visible temple of the Holy Spirit. Together gathered worship and scattered worship serve to build up the body of Christ and display God's glory to the world—a point that comes out in the three audiences of worship.

*Third, there are three audiences for gathered worship—God, the Church, and the World.* Starting with the most important audience, God should be the primary audience of our worship. Yet, he is not the only audience.

God is the only one we worship, but the church is a second audience. We are called to sing to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16). Thus, when we worship, we must not just think of "Jesus and me," we must also consider others and the needs they have (cf. Phil. 2:3–4). This might even mean that some aspects of the worship service don't suit our fancy, but if it edifies those around me, we should rejoice (Rom. 12:15).

Finally, Cosper speaks to the fact that we must consider unbelievers who join us for gathered worship. Through the church's worship service, we are called to be a light to the world. In fact, Paul describes the importance of worshiping so that the world can understand (see 1 Cor. 14:20–25).

Bringing these three audiences together balances the aims of our gathered worship. If we are not careful, we could overemphasize outsider, so that we water down the language and doctrine of the songs. At the same time, we could be so keen to build up the saints, that nothing of the service is ever explained to the outsider. And always, in seeking to serve others, we can push God from the center! To this end, Cosper writes with wisdom, "Worship that celebrates the gospel brings all three audiences together: the God who saves by the Gospel, the Church formed by the Gospel, and the world in need of the Gospel" (90).

### 3. **Worship Forms Our Hearts and Habits**

Finally, *Rhythms of Grace* speaks about "worship as spiritual formation." Spiritual formation relates to the way our habits of worship form (or dis-form) our hearts and affections. Drawing on the helpful book by James K. A. Smith, [\*You Are What You Love\*](#), Cosper describes habits

that are thin and thick. Thin habits are daily, ordinary habits like brushing our teeth; thick habits are ones that help shape our identity like reading or not reading the Bible, or binge-watching television instead of spending time with church.

With respect to worship, how we gather, what we teach, and the repeated language we use in service is a thick habit. In other words, whether we know it or not, the church we attend every Sunday is having a considerable impact on our view of God and the world. Therefore, we need to be discerning about what we include and exclude in worship services. Most importantly, our gatherings should encourage us in the gospel and life with Christ.

Wisely, Cosper suggests that one of the best ways to consider best practices for worship is to learn from church history. For instance, he considers how worship has been formed in the history of the church. And specifically, he considers various liturgical practices of worship. Liturgy biblical word (*leiturgeio*, serve) and it means “the work of the people.” It refers to the “work” that God’s people do when they gather.

Throughout church history, the gospel has shaped its liturgy. When it hasn’t, those who love the gospel have called for reform. The Reformation sought to “reform” worship around the gospel, because as Cosper puts it, “The words we hear, sing, and speak in worship help form our images of God, . . . our understanding of what the church is and does, . . . and our practices of engaging with God, with each other, and with the world” (118).

In other words, everything we do in a service teaches something. And this is not just true for adults who understand all that is said and done. It is also true for children who grow up in the church.

All in all, *Rhythms of Grace* provides many concrete examples of how to form our worship service around the gospel. But I will leave those for you to discover. In short, Cosper’s book is an excellent resource for every worship leader, musician, or church member.

You can pick up a copy on the book shelf at church. And you can go back and listen to the “[Elements of Worship](#)” Sunday School lessons which consider these points also.

For His Glory and your joy,

Matt Wood with Pastor David