

Worship Is a Compass

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Preacher: Dr. Rhys Bezzant

[0:00] Now, friends, it's a great delight to be here in these four weeks as we talk about kind of the theology of worship.

I figure that we know the elements of a church service. We know that we're going to sing, we know that we're going to pray or listen to the scriptures read and taught. But I find, at least at home, that there isn't great depth in understanding why we do what we do.

So, adding to that, the kind of contemporary issue that people think regular church attendance is twice a month.

Now, it might be a little different here, I'm not sure, though some of the pastors at Trinity think that probably that's becoming more and more of an expectation or a standard in the US as well.

But certainly at home, if a person turns up twice a month, they see themselves as being very committed to this church. Now, when I first became a Christian when I was 13, it wasn't just you went to church twice a month, you went to church twice a Sunday.

[1:12] You were expected to come to church to the morning worship and the evening. We used to call it a gospel service, kind of a youth service. And notice then, just in the course of my own life, how our expectations have changed.

So, it's a good question to ask, not just what do we do in a church service, but why do we do it and how do we think we should benefit from doing it regularly.

So, that's kind of driving my interest in this four-part series. Now, I love you guys asking questions along the way.

There are no dumb questions, there are just dumb answers. So, please don't feel self-conscious about putting up your hand, rugby tackling me from the microphone or something like that.

But, I love your interaction. So, please feel free to do that, okay? I know that on Sunday morning, it's probably easier to err on the passive side and kind of listen.

[2:23] And if that's your thing, that's fine. But, please don't feel afraid to ask a question if you have a question that's... Just a comment. Or a comment even, of course. Yeah, yeah, do it all you want.

No, the more the merrier. My comment is that we're called to worship, the why is that we're called to worship because we were built to worship. And because God tells us to worship Him.

Sure, sure. Does He tell us to worship Him every week? He gives us a Sabbath that He made it holy. Sure. Yeah.

Sure. Well, then that still begs other questions, doesn't it? Whether the Old Testament Sabbath is for Christians today and what it means that we have an eternal Sabbath that we're waiting for. So, these are the kinds of questions that I want to raise.

And to do it in a friendly way, I'm trying to give us each week a big metaphor. A big idea that will somehow build our conversation, but perhaps as well help our memory.

[3:26] And this week, the metaphor that I'm appealing to is that worship is a compass. With my students, at least, having some of these picture words is very, very helpful because it's not just that I want to teach them, but I want them to teach others as well.

And so, the more tools they have in their kit, pictures or kind of ideas that are readily transferable, that helps me and helps them too, I hope.

Now, I want to start with a definition, though it's pretty loose. I want to say that worship is simply a God-centered life.

We could unpack it more. For example, we could say that it's about both adoration and actions. We could unpack it further and say that it's response to God's revelation.

I think all those are helpfully true. But it's the first phrase, worship is a God-centered life, that I really want to hold on to in particular.

[4:49] Because there are big debates about this. Is worship something you do every day of the week? Or is worship something you do on Sundays?

Or is worship just that part of the service that's singing? So there are very broad definitions of worship and very narrow definitions of worship.

And this is a hot debate in many circles. How do you define worship? Is worship more about the actions of your week? Or is worship more the attitudes and responses on Sunday?

And according to your kind of tight or broad definitions, this sometimes becomes quite heated. So we had Don Carson come to Ridley where I teach to do a preaching school.

He's known for that, right? And we arrived in chapel and one of my students stands up to begin the chapel service and says, Welcome this morning to worship.

[6:02] And at morning tea, not because of Don Carson's kind of influence, but at morning tea after the chapel service, there was this hot debate. Some people say you cannot stand up and say welcome to worship.

You're worshipping every day of the week, right? You can say welcome to chapel or welcome to church, but not welcome to worship. But if you're on the more Pentecostal end of the Christian spectrum, you'll define worship even more narrowly to deal with a very particular kind of song in a very particular place in the church service.

So when I first became a Christian, we had a hymn book in church, right? There aren't many hymn books around anymore. But in those days, in a hymn book, you'd have the section called Praise, and the section called Worship, and the section called Daily Christian Living, and the section called The Lord's Supper, and the section called Christ's Coming, or the section called Christ's Passion.

In those days, worship was just a tiny bit of your singing. But it's as if these days, worship is just that part of the hymn book that's the first 30 songs.

So there are big debates about how broad or how narrow we should think of worship. I actually think the Bible uses the worship language in both ways.

[7:32] So when you look at Romans 12, 1-2, you'll be reminded that worship is for every day, right? Let me read it to us.

I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you might discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. So at least for Paul in Romans 12, worship is just giving your body to God.

And I presume you do that on Sundays and Mondays, right? That's the broad definition. Everything you do in your body can be a kind of worship. But when you get to Revelation chapters 4 and 5, the word worship is applied to singing.

Either in Revelation 4, singing about the Creator, or in Revelation 5, singing about the Redeemer. In both instances, the songs of worship are offered before the throne.

[8:50] You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and they were created. So I take it that the Bible can use the word worship narrowly, or can use the word worship broadly.

And I'm happy with both usages of the word. However, in these four Sunday school sessions, we're going to be using kind of the more narrow definition, what we do in church.

Please don't hear me saying that I don't think your Monday to Friday work is worship. What you do in your body is worship. But for these weeks at least, for our purposes, we're narrowing a little our focus.

So I'm going to take a pause for a moment and ask if you've got any comments or questions about our learning so far.

Please, Lydia. You mentioned worship singing to the Creator and the Redeemer. And I know not very many, but many songs also make a point to praise the Spirit.

[10:10] I wondered if you had a comment for or against that or anything. Yes. So I think there's no biblical reason why you ought not to worship or name the Spirit in your worship.

It's just that the Spirit is the shy one who keeps pushing the glory to the Father and the Son. So I'm not... I don't think it's wrong. And you could ask the same question about your praying.

Should we pray to the Spirit? I think there's nothing wrong with that. The Spirit is the Lord, according to 2 Corinthians 4. But it seems to me that part of the way God works is that the Spirit helps me in my prayers to the Father through the Son.

So I think it's probably more appropriate that we pray to the Father in the end. In the Scriptures. In the Scriptures. Yeah. Yeah, that's right. He leads us to the Scriptures. The Spirit leads us to the Scriptures as well, yes, of course.

And then illuminates them for us in our heart and mind. Well, this is my basic idea this morning.

[11:20] I'm a simple man, so there's only going to be one big idea each week. The big idea is that when we come to church, when we come to worship, our main goal is to practice being the creature and letting God be the creator.

That whatever else we do, however long the sermon goes, however long the singing goes, however long the praying goes, we've only got one job to do, and that's to practice being a creature.

Now, this might sound kind of patently obvious, that you can never escape being the creature, but let me tell you, I think that's basically the human problem, right?

That we pretend from time to time that we actually have the rights of the creator to create our own world in our own image. We're created in God's image, of course, but on the seventh day, God rests, having made men and women, so that he might just enjoy the creation with men and women at its climax.

In a sense, the point of Genesis chapter 1 is to show us how God loves for us to enjoy fellowship with him. He's the creator, and we've just recently been created, right?

[12:53] It seems to me the right attitude to have to God is to see ourselves as creature and not as a creator. And in Romans 1, the inverse is explained, that basically sin is worshipping the creature rather than the creator, who is forever to be praised.

So it seems like to me, and Romans 1 is important because, let me read it then, it contains the worship language. Romans 1.24, Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies amongst themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator.

So the fundamental description of sin, in this part of Romans at least, is that we try and act like the creator and worship incorrectly.

What is worshipping correctly? It's practising being the creature and not the creator, letting God be in his place and we in ours.

So what are we going to do this morning when we go upstairs to worship? Well, the only thing you have to do is realise that you're practising in any element in the service, no matter what part of it we're up to, you're practising being the creature.

[14:38] You've just got to let go. You've got to let God be God and pray to him and sing to him and learn from him. I don't want to argue that church is an instrument to achieve or do something else.

Church is a way of doing evangelism. Well, it might be on the side. Church is a way of growing in our minds. Well, yes, of course it is. But actually the most basic reason why we worship is to practise being creatures and dependent.

My second point is related to that and then I'll break again and you can ask some questions. Is that church reflects the relationship between the one who calls and the ones who are called.

So God calls us. That means we are the called ones and we turn up in response to his voice, in response to his initiative.

And if you read the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, you'll see how often the language of call is used there to describe God or to describe us.

[16:06] It's an important point. Lots of people will assume that we turn up to church and then through our intense emotions or through our beautiful voices or through a structure of the service, God sees fit to come and join us.

He's a bit resistant, right? Because it's Sunday morning after all. He was having a nice snooze but our loud praises somehow kind of wake him or our loud praises give him a throne to sit on.

Now actually, the basic relationship in church is that God is here before we turn up. God calls us.

You and I, brothers and sisters this morning, have heard his voice and we respond to his voice and arrive. He is the one who calls and we are the ones who respond.

It's kind of the same point about creator and creature with slightly different language. He's the creator. We're the creatures. We learn dependence. He's the one who calls.

[17:20] We are the called ones. So we listen to his voice and trust his words. He is the creator and knows best after all.

Now this is also pretty controversial in lots of circles because assumption in lots of places is that God will respond and come to be with us if our words, our emotions or our services have particular characteristics.

It drives me crazy when people start the church service and say, you know, please Lord, be in our midst this morning. Please Lord, may you take your place on our praises.

It just drives me crazy. He was there in the first place. He's the one who called us. We're only here because he was here first. That's the whole point of being a Christian, right? God's voice comes before our response to his voice.

So it's good and it's lovely that here at Trinity we do this, that we begin the service calling on or recognising the name of Jesus Christ.

[18:31] For he's the one who draws us together as his body. It's not like we turn up and then God scratches his head and realises that he should have done something this morning as well.

It was his initiative. It's his power. It's his voice. It's his love which draws us together in the first place.

Now, next week I'll unpack this a little bit more because it makes a big difference to the elements of a church service and how we might approach or how we think about praying or how we think about singing or how we think about Bible reading.

But both these points from Romans and from Corinthians are trying to suggest that the purpose of Sunday meeting is that we practice a God centred life.

And if we can practice it for an hour on Sundays then perhaps some of the muscle memory that we've practiced on Sundays will carry over into Mondays and Tuesdays and Wednesdays as well.

[19:41] You can also say that we're practicing what we're going to be doing for eternity. Yes, that's right. That's right. There will be singing forever. Correct. Yep. And we'll be depending on God forever.

Yeah, indeed. I'm taking a pause so that you can gather your thoughts and ask some questions or make some comments.

What do you think like a right understanding of how we do church together with our body here in Trinity how does that help us in our mission as Christians on this earth?

Like what are the practical implications of having this right? Like as we think about we come here and this is what we're doing like what are some of the benefits that we experience the body by getting this problem.

I think about it. Yep, so and I'll unpack some of it in the next few weeks as well. Primarily the church is a gift. It's something God's giving to us.

[20:49] He's giving to us each other and if we don't regard each other in church as a gift then what we end up doing is making of church a burden or a challenge and I think that just impacts how we approach it how we invite others to come along what we imagine we're doing here what we think we should be achieving or not achieving so I think it has a whole range of spin-offs the next few picture words that I'm using are the church is a gym church is a dinner party and church is a classroom and church is a party and so I want to unpack using those metaphors more of the value what do we lose if we don't turn up is the other way of putting it so lots of people decide not to come to church because they could listen to a podcast and what they say is get more from the podcast and turning up a church or they could put on their

Christian music on a CD or people don't use CDs anymore do they that just dated me on Spotify whatever and that's it has better production values than their local congregation and so on but I just think that's so wrong headed because it's assuming that it's about achieving a certain kind of standard rather than receiving a generous gift and that we're doing it together with others not by ourselves with our earpiece the temptation with podcasts for example is that you put in your earpiece or put on your headphones and it sounds like that celebrity preacher is whispering to you right you and he have this kind of really close relationship he's just talking to you and so you kind of feel special the problem is of course he's not and secondly you haven't understood his applications because you receive it as application for an individual rather than application for congregation so it's you kind of end up missing all the gifts that God wants to give yeah and with TV evangelism and with podcasts

I believe that God turns out being the second banana and the pastor the speaker ends up being the first banana and takes away from God yeah yeah it certainly does take away from God and the hair or the charisma of the pastor you know I often think about celebrity pastors hair that's right Mesopotamia Mesopotamia yeah that's right it's very easy to be distracted by the immediate yeah one of my students said he wasn't reading the Bible in the morning for himself anymore he was just listening to podcasts and I said to him he'd become a medieval Christian where he now had a priest who was getting him to God rather than reading the Bible for himself right that's what he was doing he was effectively not turning up at church because he thought that he could get the good oil from the podcast but he was just missing the gifts that God wants to give he says in his word do not forsake the assembly of one another that's right there yeah yeah yes and he'd say he wasn't he was still turning up once or twice a month that is the assumption about weekly attendance has gone missing yes sir what gifts do we get by coming together to worship that we don't get you know

I'm agreeing but can you be a little more particular like when we come together what gifts are we receiving that we don't when a great worship song comes on and we're just we turn and we're praising God by ourselves yeah it's maturity so I don't think you can be mature alone that is I think sermons are primarily I hope I don't get into trouble for this I think sermons are primarily to build a congregation of which you will benefit as an individual but I think corporate maturity is the primary goal of a church service for that matter for worship as we together learn to be the creatures before the creator but of course in our world we think individual maturity and therefore we say well I'm individually maturing by listening to my podcast but actually you're not corporately maturing you're not actually maturing as God wants you to mature which is to learn your place in the body in the fellowship right this is the thing when I give these talks or these seminars that one of the things that people react most strongly to is that church is for corporate maturity not for your personal maturity and that gets often lots of pushback yes brother yeah I agree yeah sure so that

I do in the end benefit individually too but I can't say I'm not going to turn up at church because I'm not going to get anything out of it today you turn up at church because we're going to get something out of it today and so the danger of highlighting the individual maturity at the expense of the corporate maturity is that then you say the podcast is going to do me just fine could you touch on the historical worship aspect with Israel and the relationship to God versus now sure so one of the biggest lessons in Leviticus or in God's instructions for the temple and the sacrifices is that you have to do things on God's own terms he's the one who sets the rules for how you worship he's the one who's at the center of the holy of holies and you can only approach him recognizing the way he wants us to approach him so I think this point

[27:51] I could expand it is actually deeply embedded in the Old Testament storyline that we worship according to the rules that God has made for worship we can only approach him because he's first approached us we can only approach him on the terms that he's laid down and of course in the worship of Israel they held strongly to it being a corporate experience it was after all the whole nation of the Hebrews that God brought out of Egypt through the Passover sacrifice on a potentially pastoral application level how does this how would you translate this to someone who says I'm battling feeling just really discouraged and depressed and church just feels overwhelming to me or my boyfriend broke up with me and I just can't get myself out of bed or my feelings were hurt by someone and I don't want to go and deal with them how might this be a helpful thing how would you communicate this to someone who's saying it just feels really hard to go to corporate worship yes so I understand that there'll be seasons in a person's life where corporate worship is very challenging either they have a kind of a social phobia that makes being in groups hard and so on but I'd say this at least at some level meeting with other

Christians in those seasons is really important even if it's not in Sunday worship for a small time but a small group in the week or a prayer triplet as a minimum but the other thing is of course you could say to the person why don't you come five minutes late and leave five minutes early so that you don't have to talk to anyone but that you can remind yourself with the practices of the service what God wants to give and how you've been blessed what your responsibilities are despite this season of depression or trial one lesson that I've learned in my Christian walk is that you go to church especially when you don't want to go I was battling addiction for a decade and a half and I want to go to church only when I had some clean time under my belt and it was like get your act together and then you can be in

God's presence and I was at Redeemer then under Keller and I just couldn't and I just believe that you go to church especially when you don't want to go go when you want to go but especially when you don't want to go and I never regretted going to church especially when I didn't want to go yes I agree with you brother that's great and it happens to me like that where I'm thinking oh my goodness I'm feeling overwhelmed by this that or the other why don't I kind of cut myself some slack and not go everything no no that's just ridiculous that's exactly right doesn't doesn't actually in the end help you doesn't actually what I need to do then is to practice being the creature rather than the creator and church will help me set set my compass right again yeah the reason why I've used this picture of the compass is that I think when you're on a long walk or a long journey then repeated appeals to the compass is exactly when you need to find your bearings again right if you're going two paces a compass isn't actually of enormous use but if you know the journey is long and hard with lots of distractions and lots of ways that you can be set off track then looking at your compass repeatedly to work out are you still tracking north one degree here or there after a year two years five years ten years can make an enormous difference you can be so far away from the Lord if you've only been the first day one degree off so I'm trying to argue that coming to church practicing being the creature rather than the creator learning again to be the called one responding to

God's call is a way of weakly recalibrating celebrating our journey weekly setting ourselves due north again and I think we need to do that regularly and I'd say weekly in Hebrews 2 we're reminded that often people stop being Christians because not because they've made a moral a bad moral choice but they kind of just drift like the boat that is no longer tethered to the jetty and without realising it you're very quickly a long way away from where you want to be given the pull of the sea and the winds yes please brother a couple of times you made implicit references to how often yes one you just made and I'm just wondering if you're going to do any more than what you just did which is

I think weekly would be good and you said something yes sure yes and I do think weekly is best that is it might be good if we went to church twice a day I think it's not going to happen anytime soon but weekly is a pattern that the scriptures give us both in terms of Old Testament worship and New Testament worship as well for the reason that as that final point makes we're setting our compass to north we're recalibrating our walk weekly churches like a compass because the first Christians moved their worship day from Saturday to Sunday to the Lord's day to the first day of the new week rather than the seventh day of the old week that is what we're doing on

[34 : 48] Sundays is recalibrating our journey around the new world world that was begun with the resurrection of Jesus Christ and consequently it's not to say therefore it's not the only argument I give for weekly worship but at least this that we are being reminded every Sunday of the new world that we've begun to celebrate on the Lord's day and I need that I need that reminder and that shaping every week to orient my heart to true north to the new heavens and the new earth when I'll meet the Lord face to face I'll give in some texts there which point out the novelty of the Lord's day the Sunday as the day for Christians meeting but of course in Hebrews 4 9 as well we're reminded that what we're doing on

Sundays is practicing for the eternal Sabbath and so it's not a bad way of honoring Sundays this being our Sabbath rest as a way of practicing the Sabbath rest forever I work hard and I'm a single man so I work kind of too much basically but a good thing about a Sabbath rest is I'm telling myself I'm not stronger than God I need to rest as well if God did and Sundays might be a good day to do it menos back■ hey any other thoughts means so the original Sabbath was from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday correct and that transition into Sunday do you know exactly how that took place and why it took place

Yes, so the earliest Christians wanted to recognise the resurrection of Christ and on the first day of the week, on the Sunday, and because of his resurrection and his resurrection power and the new power we have as God's New Testament people.

So it was a model recognising the centrality of Jesus' resurrection. I thought I read something about a Catholic priest initiating it, inaugurating it on a Saturday, taking it away from the day, Friday, I mean on a Sunday, taking it away from Saturday, put it on a Sunday, so I didn't know.

Yes, I say, no, it's a long time before there were Catholic priests. So in those texts I've given you there, even the writers of the New Testament recognised that now this day, this Sunday, this Lord's Day, is the day where it's appropriate for Christians to gather to worship their risen King.

[38:04] In the Western world, I assume it's typical in Australia as well, like we kind of have a rhythm now of five days of work and two days of weekend. In Australia we do two days of work and five days of work.

Have you thought much about sort of the difference between maybe a biblical view of a week and a cultural view of a week? Interesting. So you mean the biblical view being six and one rather than five and two?

Well, and also, like, it just occurs to me, there are some people who feel very inconvenienced by going to church in the morning because it's right in the middle of their weekend. Yeah, sure. And you just sort of described it as being, hey, this should be the beginning of our week.

Yeah, and if, you know, like in some of our churches in Melbourne, people have a holiday house or a vacation house and they go away for the weekend and they don't get back. They think they're doing well to get to church once a month because they're down at the beach the other weekends, whatever it might be.

I think the pattern of one and six or five and two has been the most successful in history.

[39:13] So in the French Revolution they tried to make the working week ten days. You work for nine and have the tenth off. That didn't last very long. And it's actually why when the French decided after their revolution to have a ten-day week, that's when the English turned up the volume on having a Sabbath rest because they wanted to be unlike the French, right?

And so the importance of Sabbath in Victorian England became increasingly important to show that we're not the French. We have a very strict six-on-one rule here, right?

Yeah, of course, and kids have sport, at least in Australia. Kids have sport on Sunday morning, Saturday morning, Sunday morning. So that means that it's more difficult. It might mean that we need to think more flexibly about service times.

So I know that there are churches in Melbourne that have Sunday night services so that those folk who've been away for the weekend at their holiday house, their vacation house, can get to church on Sunday nights as part of their strategy.

You think, well, being as a person who doesn't have a holiday house, I don't have much sympathy for them. If I did, I'm sure I'd like the arrangement. Our son used to go with us from age 11 to like 14 or 15 to the RP in Cambridge, and he got baptized, and I'd go to Bible school and all that, and worship.

[40 : 49] He knew the language and really loved the Lord, and he's an oboe player, and he went to conservatory. First boarding school, then conservatory. Now he's in L.A., and he's auditioning all over the world for an oboe player.

And early on in his career, it was oboe on Sunday. He's completely left to faith. And it's a heartbreaker, and we wish, you know, what do you do?

What do you say? Yes, that's awful. This is his career. He's a world-class oboe player, but he doesn't know the Lord. He's fallen away. Yes, so we, of course, wish that things had otherwise eventuated.

But I'd say this. We ought not to develop our theology and our practice around the exceptions. That is, there are going to be people who do work on Sundays, either in trades or in professions where they have to.

That's just their job. And you kind of go, okay. But let's not then say, therefore, Sunday isn't the right thing to do. Sunday, weekly worship isn't the right thing to do. We still want to say it is, right? We just recognise there are going to be exceptions.

[42 : 07] We can't make law around exceptions. You have to establish the principles and then help individual folk fit into that model, given their own life situation.

Yes, but... Do you have strong opinions, including communion, every time we get together, as some denominations do, or just periodically, or is there a biblical view of this that we can...

No, I don't know that there's a particular biblical view. And there's a lot of theology that you have to sort through first before you make the decision how often you have communion.

I'm an Anglican, so I do it more often than less often. But that's just my tribe. Good. Well, I think we'll call it quits there.

I'll say a prayer for us, and then we can get ready for worship. Our dear Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we thank you so much for this morning, this opportunity to talk and to listen, to spur each other on to love and good deeds.

[43 : 19] Even now I ask that you'd help us in the next hour or so to worship, to practise being creatures before our Creator, to respond to your call, which comes before our obedience.

And I pray that you'd help us to learn these things such that we might teach others. For we ask it in Christ's strong name. Amen. If those of you in the back could take your chairs and just fill them around the tables, and if you're up in the front, if you want to stack the chairs over here, that would be great help.

Thank you. Thank you.