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WHAT'S THE POINT? PLANNING YOUR MEETINGS ON PURPOSE

I. Introduction

- A. Various factors influence our decisions about how we order our meetings. (Scripture, traditions, experiences, culture)
- B. There is a strong connection in Scripture between God-glorifying public gatherings and the spiritual health of God's people (2 Chron. 29-32; 2 Chron. 34-35;

II. The Significance of Our Gatherings

"Liturgy" is literally "a work on behalf of the people." Whether we know it or not, every church has a liturgy and our liturgy has huge implications.

A. Liturgy *models*

You can tell a lot about people's theology from what they do in church. (Carl Trueman, *Fools Rush in Where Monkeys Fear to Tread*, 57)

The forms, structures, and emphases we choose model

1. How to think about and relate to God
2. How to pray and sing
3. How to relate to Scripture
4. How to relate to each other

B. Liturgy *teaches*

1. Through sermons
2. Through songs
3. Through repetition

C. Liturgy *shapes and influences*

As we plan and order our services, discerning the content to include, we shape the beliefs and devotional lives of our church members. (Mike Cospers, *Rhythms of Grace*, 118)

1. Our views of God, ourselves, the world
2. Our thoughts, words, and actions
3. We become like *what* we worship (Ps. 115:8). We also become like *how* we worship.

III. The Substance of Our Gatherings

- A. In the OT, God called his people to himself to celebrate his mighty acts of redemption and renew the gracious covenant he had made with them, to the end that they might live for his glory.
- B. In a similar way, God calls us together today to retell the his mighty act of redemption in the gospel.

Corporate worship is nothing more, and nothing less, than a re-presentation of the gospel in the presence of God and his people for his glory and their good. (Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centered Worship*)

- C. We gather to remember, rehearse, revel in, and respond to the gospel so that we might protect it from neglect, distortion, and redefinition.
- D. The gospel is central to our identity as God's people.
 1. It is of first importance (1 Cor. 15:3)
 2. It is the power of God (Rom. 1:16)
 3. Paul constantly reminds his readers of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1)
 4. We're to insist on the gospel (Titus 3:8)
 5. Peter links lack of growth to forgetting we're forgiven (2 Pet. 1:9)
- E. Our meetings must communicate gospel truth, touch hearts with gospel implications, and equip people to live lives worthy of the gospel.

IV. The Structure of Our Gatherings

God gathers his people to himself as an act of grace. So when we come together, our intentions and actions need to be shaped by God's purpose in drawing us together. Every time we meet, we need to be reminded of the basis of our relationship with God and with one another. Every gathering should be gospel-shaped. (David Peterson, *Encountering God Together*, 21).

- A. Elements
 1. Preaching (2Tim. 4:2; Rom. 10:14-17)
 2. Scripture Reading (1Tim. 4:13)
 3. Singing (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19)
 4. Prayer (1Tim. 2:1-2)
 5. The Lord's Supper (1Cor. 11:23-26)
 6. Baptism (Mt. 28:19-20)
 7. Financial giving (1Cor. 16:1-2)

8. Spiritual Gifts (1 Cor. 12 & 14; 1 Thess. 5:19-21)
9. Confessions of Faith (2 Cor. 9:13; Heb. 4:14, 10:23)
10. Greeting (Phil. 4:21-22)
11. Announcements, testimonies, baby dedications, etc.

B. Order

Worship cannot simply be a matter of arbitrary choice, church tradition, personal preference, or cultural appeal. There are foundational truths in the gospel of Christ's redeeming work that do not change if the gospel is to remain the gospel. So, if our worship structures are to tell this story consistently, then there must be certain aspects of our worship that remain consistent. (Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 85)

We should not ignore the wisdom of church forebears just because it's old, or automatically reject it just because we didn't think of it. We consider the history because God does not give all of his wisdom to any one time or people. (Chapell, 16)

One suggestion (based on the list in *Christ-Centered Worship*)

1. Adoration of God's greatness
2. Acknowledgement of our sin
3. Assurance of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ
4. Gratefulness for God's provision
5. Requests and intercession (lament can be included here)
6. Proclamation of God's Word
7. Communion
8. Charge and Blessing

This order reflects numerous Old Testament encounters with God and New Testament letters. More simply put we order our meetings to reflect:

1. God's Glory
2. God's Grace
3. Our Response

V. Values to Cultivate

A. God's Word

1. Read the Bible (1 Tim. 4:13)
2. Preach the Bible (2 Tim. 4:1)
3. Pray the Bible (Psalms, 1 Tim. 2:1-2)
4. Sing the Bible (Col. 3:16)
5. See the Bible (1 Cor. 11:23-26; Mt. 28:18-20)
6. Obey the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16; Ps. 19:7-11)

B. The gospel.

1. A clear presentation of it
2. A compelling passion for it
3. A consistent application of it

C. Repetition.

When there are well established procedures with which everyone is familiar, it makes it easier to concentrate on the content rather than the outward form. (Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*, 165)

Forms are a means to an end; if they are constantly changing, they obscure the end rather than lead to it. (Old, 165)

1. Forms, songs, prayers,
2. Weekly, monthly, yearly

D. Variety.

1. We can obscure the truth of the gospel through embellishment. We can obscure the beauty of the gospel through reactionary starkness.
2. Vary order of events, length of time given to each, books of the Bible used, participants, etc.

E. Progression.

1. The church fathers used liturgy to preserve the truths of Scripture.
2. Every meeting tells a story. Sometimes the story is confusing, or the wrong one.

F. Explanations.

1. Explain what people might not know or bring theological weight to words and actions that people might miss.

Today, in an age that seeks to simplify everything—songs, sermons, readings, and ritual of the service—the clear and powerful proclamation of sound biblical doctrine and practice in every part of the service will give spiritual depth to worship and demonstrate the vitality of the faith in the lives of the worshippers. (Allen Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, p. 506)

2. Transitions
3. What you're doing

G. What's yet to come

If we even begin to comprehend the risen Christ in all his glory, or faintly hear the heavenly choirs that surround the throne with their anthems of praise, or imagine what life in the presence of the Lord will be like, then we can never again be satisfied with worship as usual. We will always be striving to make our worship fit for glory; and we will always be aware that our efforts, no matter how good and noble, are still of this world and not yet of that one. (Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation*, 474).

1. We should never think that we have "arrived" in terms of our liturgy.
2. Our meetings should stir up a hunger for seeing God face to face.

VI. Five Effects of a Well-Planned Gospel-Informed Gathering

- A. Exaltation – God's glory in the gospel should be elevated in our minds and hearts (Ps. 34:1-3; 2 Cor. 4:6)
- B. Edification – God's people should be built up in the gospel (1 Cor. 14:12; Col. 2:6-7; Eph. 4:15-16)
- C. Exhortation – God's people should be stirred up to good works in response to and empowered by the gospel (Heb. 10:19-25)
- D. Encounter – God's presence should be acknowledged and experienced as a primary benefit of the gospel (1 Cor. 14:24-25; Heb. 12:22-24; Heb. 10:19-23)
- E. Evangelism – unbelievers should be able to hear the gospel (1 Cor. 14:24-25)

Recommended Books

1. Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice, Bryan Chapell
2. Encountering God Together: Biblical Patterns for Ministry and Worship, David Peterson
3. Engaging with God, David Peterson
4. Rhythms of Grace: How the Church's Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel, Mike Cospers
5. The Worship of God: Some Theological, Pastoral, and Practical Reflections, Ralph Martin
6. Worship By the Book, D.A. Carson, editor