

LET US

WHY WE  
WORSHIP  
THE WAY  
WE DO

WORSHIP



GOD

DEREK W.H.  
THOMAS

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Senior pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church  
Birmingham, Ala.

Let Us Worship God



# Let Us Worship God

*Why We Worship the Way We Do*

DEREK W.H. THOMAS



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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





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## 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

will go on to interpret, Christians belong to a community that is “called . . . out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). The church exists in the world and has responsibilities to the world, but it is also fundamentally *separate from* the world. She breathes a different atmosphere from that of the fallen world in which she lives. The church, as Jesus reminds us in His High Priestly Prayer, is *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17:14–15). This leads to another conclusion suggested in Jesus’ words to Peter.

Fourth, the church can expect opposition. In this instance, it is the opposition of “the gates of hell.” Satan and his demons will attempt at every stage to destroy the church. Through difficulty, division, and discouragement, the warriors from hell will attempt to destroy what Christ has established. There will be seasons of assault (“the evil day,” Eph. 6:13), but they will not ultimately prevail. The term “gates of hell” (Greek *pulai hadou*) is an Old Testament term meaning “death.” The Septuagint translation of Job 38:17, for example, reads, “Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness [*pulōroi de hadou*]?” What Jesus is saying is that the church will not be destroyed by death. On the contrary, at death Christ’s people will join the *invisible* church in heaven.

### **Pentecost and Beyond**

Seven weeks after the resurrection of Christ, Peter stood in Jerusalem and declared that the ancient prophecies of the coming of the Holy Spirit were now fulfilled (Acts 2:14–41; see Joel 2:28–32; Isa. 32:15, 44; Ezek. 36:27). God’s Spirit was poured forth and three thousand people believed Peter’s message. The church as we know it began. Well, not exactly. There were no buildings that looked like churches—a reminder that the church is not a building even though we fairly

consistently use the word to mean just that (one of the reasons that the Puritans referred to the building as a meeting house, and it would spare a great deal of confusion if we returned to the practice).

The book of Acts tells the story of the growth of the New Testament church. It has to navigate the difficult issue of Jewish-gentile relationships. We see the election of what looks like proto-deacons to provide care for Hellenistic and Jewish widows (Acts 6:1–7). And, as persecution erupts in Jerusalem, and Christians flee north and west, we see friction in Antioch when Peter and Paul come to verbal blows over fellowship with gentiles (Gal. 2:11–14). Through Paul’s increasing influence and priority over Peter, churches were established in places like Galatia, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and Corinth. Rome is the exception in that the church there seems to have come into being largely through Christians moving there rather than by an Apostolic presence. At the end of Acts, the gospel has reached almost the entire known world. Churches are now present in most of the major cities of the Roman Empire, in which Sunday worship is observed and prayer and preaching and singing are component parts of what they do.

The church grew and developed organizationally and structurally. There is, for example, the development of the notion of “office” (“deacons,” 1 Tim. 3:8–13; “overseer,” 1 Tim. 3:1–7 and Titus 1:7–9; “elders,” Titus 1:5–9). And for the first three hundred years or so, the church met almost exclusively in people’s homes (house churches) rather than in designated buildings. House churches are mentioned in the homes of Mary (John Mark’s mother, Acts 12:12), Lydia (Acts 16:40), Prisca and Aquila (Rom. 16:3, 5), Nympha (Col. 4:15), and Philemon and Apphia (Philem. 1–2).

After Pentecost, a discernible pattern emerges that Luke summarizes this way: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching

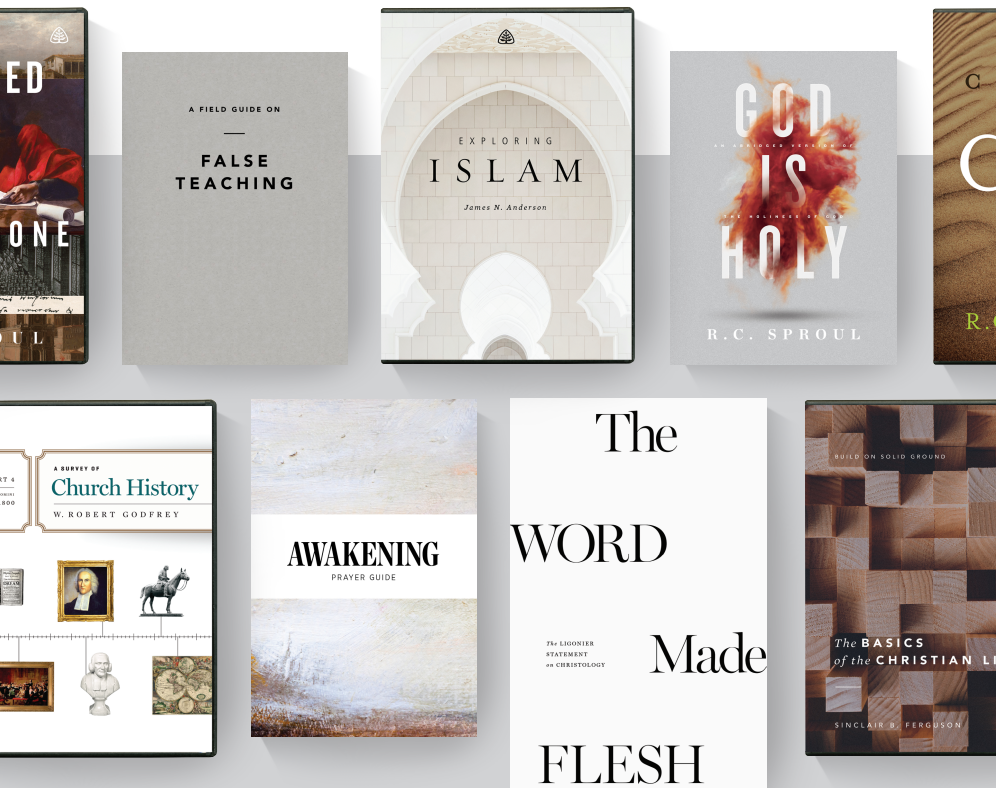
and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). We will take a look at this verse again later, but all these aspects of worship require meeting corporately. In our day, there is the phenomenon of “unchurched Christians,” something for which the New Testament does not allow. Indeed, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in the third century, famously coined the phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, meaning “outside the church there is no salvation.” The phrase has been employed as part of the Roman Catholic dogma that those outside the formal boundaries of Roman Catholicism cannot be saved. However, this is not its intended meaning. The Westminster Confession of Faith, in a section on the church, added an extra word to clarify its intent: “out of which there is no *ordinary* possibility of salvation.”<sup>1</sup> What the confession underlines is that usually Christians belong to a corporate body, the church. There are exceptions: “A repentant thief on the cross, a Muslim convert to Christianity who has not yet discovered other believers, or a man stranded on the desert island with only a Bible, each has plausible reasons for not being a part of a church.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Jesus, but Not Church**

There are siren voices in our time that suggest we can have Jesus but abandon the “institutional church.” The mantra goes like this: “We want Jesus, or community, or discussion groups, or therapy, but not church.” A forest of trees has been cut down to produce books with exotic titles like George Barna’s *Revolution* and William P. Young’s *The Shack*, both of which describe a churchless Christianity.<sup>3</sup> And then there are even more memorable titles like *Life after Church*, *Quitting Church*, and *So You Don’t Want to Go to Church Anymore*.<sup>4</sup>

Finish the following sentences:

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“WORSHIP IS A SERIOUS  
ENGAGEMENT. IT CAN NEVER BE  
DONE LIGHTLY OR FLIPPANTLY.”

DEREK THOMAS

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Worship isn't just something we do—it's the purpose of our existence. Every week, Christians come together to share a taste of heaven itself, where all God's redeemed people will exalt His holy name forever. But what's really going on when we worship? And what's worship supposed to look like in the life of the church?

In *Let Us Worship God*, Dr. Derek Thomas addresses the “how” and “why” of Christian worship. May we worship God however we want? Do we need the church, or can we worship alone? What are the necessary elements of a worship service? These and other questions find their answers in these pages, leading us to a greater understanding of worship as life's highest privilege and richest joy.

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