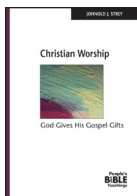


# 1

## The Purpose of Worship<sup>1</sup>

Imagine for a moment that you have just moved to a new community. Besides unpacking all your possessions and arranging your home, you need to make a number of personal choices. Who will be your new family doctor? What activities do your children want to become involved in? Are there community clubs or groups you would like to join? Where will you make your new church home?

Many readers of this book would answer the last question by finding a church that belongs to the same denomination as their previous church. Their intent is to join a church that shares the same confession of faith that they have. They want to find a church that is committed to preaching the forgiveness of sins through the saving work of Jesus Christ. They want a church that teaches the gos-



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).

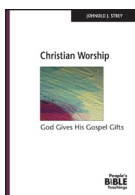


pel faithfully and properly administers the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

Others looking for a church may use different criteria. They might look for a church with particular programs. They might look for a church that caters to a certain age group or to people in similar life situations as theirs. They might look for a church that offers a worship experience to their liking.

A simple internet search for “churches near me” is enough to discover how worship differs greatly from church to church. Even the names that churches use for their weekly services can indicate something significant. Many Lutheran congregations call their weekly gathering *worship* or *service*. The term *Mass* is used primarily by Roman Catholic congregations and implies a particular order of worship. Some churches use the word *Eucharist*, which refers to a celebration of Holy Communion.

The names worship, service, Mass, and Eucharist are traditional titles for Christian worship. But as you peruse your internet search results, other nontraditional terms stand out. One church calls its Saturday evening service “Saturday Night Live,” a reference to the television show by the same name and an implication that this service will be informal and entertaining. Another church advertises a *blue jeans service*, implying that worshipers will be dressed casually and will experience a casual environment. A third congregation offers a *Sunday celebration* that suggests a happy and festive ambiance. Still another congregation gives different names to its three weekend gatherings, such as *blended worship*, *praise and worship service*, and *alternative and edgy service*. Each of those titles suggests something about that particular worship experience.<sup>2</sup>



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).

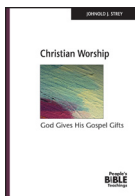


NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

One thing is clear from the wide variety of titles for churches' weekly worship gatherings. Across churches at large, there is not a consensus about worship. There are churches that follow a prescribed order of worship and there are churches that have very simple structure in worship. There are churches with long-standing worship traditions and churches with innovative worship. This leads us to ask: What is Christian worship supposed to be about? What is the purpose of worship?

***Defining the purpose: two problems***

Any time we have a question about Christian teaching or practice, we turn to the Bible for guidance. When we turn to the Bible to discover the purpose of worship, we find that the answer is not as simple as we might expect. The Bible does call on Christians to gather regularly as a body of believers. "Let us not neglect meeting together, as some have the habit of doing. Rather, let us encourage each other, and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25 EHV). Yet the Bible does not give Christians an explicit set of instructions to follow when they gather together. Although God prescribed the rituals of worship in the Old Testament era, the New Testament clearly states that those commands no longer apply in the new era. The apostle Paul wrote, "Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Colossians 2:16,17). When we look to Scripture for wisdom about our congregational gatherings, we see a *description* of what believers have done but not an exact *prescription* of what we must do.



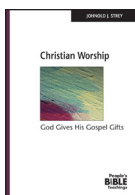
From ***People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

As we try to discover a biblical purpose of worship, another complication confronts us. As strange as it may seem to us today, the words commonly translated “worship” in the New Testament do not refer to the regular gathering of a congregation around the Word and sacraments. Several Greek words in the New Testament are translated “worship,” but they all refer to something other than Christians gathered together to hear God’s Word.

- The word most often translated “worship” is *proskuneo*. This term conveys the idea of bowing one’s face toward the ground as an act of respect or worship. For example, this is the word used to describe the actions of the Magi who came to visit the boy Jesus in Matthew 2:1-12.
- The second most common word translated “worship” is *latreuo* and refers to religious rites carried out as an act of worship. Although forms we use in today worship are properly called rites, the term *latreuo* does not necessarily imply actions performed by a group of people. The word is used in Luke 2:37 to refer to the widow Anna who regularly worshiped God in the temple in Jerusalem.
- A third term translated “worship” is *sebo*. This word carries the idea of someone who expresses allegiance to their god in their attitudes or by their actions. In Mark 7:5,6, Jesus cites Isaiah 29:13 as a verse that predicted the empty worship of the religious leaders of his day: The actions of the Pharisees appeared to express allegiance to God, but Jesus knew that their hearts did not reflect their outward actions.



From **People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



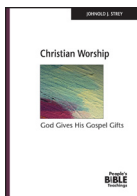
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

- The word *leitorgo* is the basis for our English word “liturgy.” The secular meaning of the word referred to a public service project that benefited others or to someone who served in public office for the benefit of the community. In the New Testament, the word is affected by its context, referring to the service of Old Testament priests (Hebrews 10:11), church leaders who worshiped together (Acts 13:2), and sharing material blessings as a way to serve others in need (Romans 15:27).
- Finally, the word *threskia* is used a few times in the New Testament as an expression of religious beliefs and practices. For example, this word is used in Acts 26:5 by the apostle Paul to refer to the religion of Judaism, of which he was once a strict follower.

As we define the purpose of our public worship gatherings, we realize that the Bible doesn’t always use the word worship the same way that we commonly use the word today. We also recognize that the descriptions of worship gatherings in the Bible are just that—descriptions. We will not find specifically prescribed patterns for us to follow today. Nevertheless, the descriptions of public worship found in Scripture are still instructive because they show us what God’s people, guided by his Word, deemed to be the most appropriate words and actions for their regular assemblies.

### ***Guidance from the Old Testament***

The first mention of a public worship assembly in Scripture comes in Genesis 4:26, “At that time people began to *call on the name of the LORD.*” Prior to this verse,



From ***People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



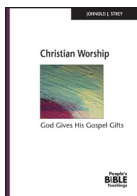
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

believers in the newly created world worshiped God in a personal and informal way. For example, Abel, the second son born to Adam and Eve, sacrificed animals from his flocks as an act of worship to God (Genesis 4:1-5). But at the time of Enosh, the grandson of Adam and Eve, believers began to publicly worship the Lord.

The English translation of Genesis 4:26 might not capture the intended meaning of the original Hebrew words. In English, the expression “call on the name of the LORD” sounds like a description of prayer. But the original Hebrew expression also refers to public proclamation. In Exodus 34:5, this expression is used to describe God addressing Moses on Mount Sinai: “The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and *proclaimed the name of the LORD*” (ESV). When Genesis 4:26 tells us that “people began to call on the name of the LORD,” it would be more accurate to say that people began to *proclaim* the name of the Lord. The phrase “proclaim the name of the Lord” refers to the act of proclaiming who God is and what he has done—his characteristics and his actions. The first public worship gatherings of God’s people involved a proclamation of the Lord’s words and works.<sup>3</sup>

The account of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea and escaping from the Egyptian armies is recorded in Exodus 14. After God miraculously delivered them, Moses and the Israelites burst out with a public song of praise to God. Their song praises God for his mighty deeds by proclaiming them:

“I will sing to the LORD,  
for he is highly exalted.  
Both horse and driver  
he has hurled into the sea.



From **People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).

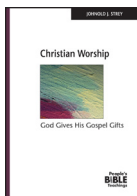


NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

“The LORD is my strength and my defense;  
     he has become my salvation.  
 He is my God, and I will praise him,  
     my father’s God, and I will exalt him.  
 The LORD is a warrior;  
     the LORD is his name.  
 Pharaoh’s chariots and his army  
     he has hurled into the sea.  
 The best of Pharaoh’s officers  
     are drowned in the Red Sea.  
 The deep waters have covered them;  
     they sank to the depths like a stone.” (Exodus 15:1-5)

Public worship among the people of Israel was codified as they traveled from Egypt to the Promised Land. While the Israelites were camped at Mount Sinai, God mapped out very specific details for their public worship life. The Lord established three annual religious holidays (Exodus 23:14-17) and detailed specifications for the tabernacle (Exodus 25-27,30,35-38,40), vestments as sacred garments for the high priest and the other priests (Exodus 28), an ordination ceremony (Exodus 29; Leviticus 8), the weekly observance of the Sabbath as a day for rest and worship (Exodus 31:12-18; Leviticus 23:3), and the types of sacrifices and offerings they were to present to him (Leviticus 1-7).

The New Testament book of Hebrews provides further explanations about Old Testament worship practices. For example, the sacrifices repeated day after day and year after year were not just acts of worship. These sacrifices testified that the rebellious nature of sin required everyone to die as punishment. The writer says, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22). At the same time, these sacrifices pointed forward to the gospel truth that the coming Savior’s sacrifice would provide God’s people with forgiveness of their sins.



From **People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



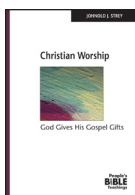
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

“[Christ] has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:26-28). So the sacrifices God prescribed in the Old Testament also communicated God’s great work of salvation that would be completed by his Son’s future sacrifice.

The psalms of the Old Testament played a major component in worship among the Israelites. The heading, “For the director of music,” appears at the beginning of many psalms and suggests that they would have been used in public worship. These Old Testament songs of prayer and praise also proclaim the same truths taught throughout Scripture. Martin Luther observed,

The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ’s death and resurrection so clearly—and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom—that it might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.<sup>4</sup>

Among the psalms are confessions of sin, prayers for God’s mercy and deliverance, thanksgiving for God’s blessings, acknowledgement of the importance of God’s Word, and prophecies of the saving work of the coming Messiah,



From *People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE



Jesus Christ. The book of Psalms continues the pattern we have observed to this point—God’s people praise him by proclaiming the things that he has done for them. Consider these verses of Psalm 103 as one of many examples from the psalms:

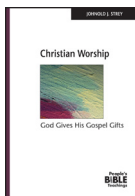
Praise the LORD, my soul;  
 all my inmost being, praise his holy name.  
 Praise the LORD, my soul,  
 and forget not all his benefits—  
 who forgives all your sins  
 and heals all your diseases,  
 who redeems your life from the pit  
 and crowns you with love and compassion,  
 who satisfies your desires with good things  
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

The LORD works righteousness  
 and justice for all the oppressed.

He made known his ways to Moses,  
 his deeds to the people of Israel:  
 The LORD is compassionate and gracious,  
 slow to anger, abounding in love.  
 He will not always accuse,  
 nor will he harbor his anger forever;  
 he does not treat us as our sins deserve  
 or repay us according to our iniquities.  
 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
 so great is his love for those who fear him;  
 as far as the east is from the west,  
 so far has he removed our transgressions from us.  
 (Psalm 103:1-12)

### *Guidance from the New Testament*

Acts 2:42 provides us with a little glimpse into the early life of the Christian church. Luke tells us that the first



From *People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).

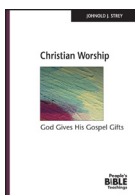


NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Luke lists four specific things to which the early church regularly and deliberately committed itself.

- “The apostles’ teaching” reflects the spiritual and eternal truths that Jesus passed on to his disciples, which are now recorded for us in Scripture.
- “Fellowship” implies a relationship between people who share a common interest or activity. The early Christians shared a confession of faith in Jesus. They joined together in worship and witness. Their common faith and common work in God’s kingdom reflected the fellowship they enjoyed together as God’s people.
- “Breaking of bread” may refer to the fellowship meal Christians often shared when they gathered together, often called the *agape* meal. (*Agape* is one of the Greek words for “love.”) It may also refer to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, or Holy Communion. Since the Christian *agape* meal was an expression of fellowship and could have been encompassed by the previous item in the list, it seems plausible that Luke is specifically referring to the Lord’s Supper when he refers to the “breaking of bread.”
- The final item in the list is “prayer”—or literally “the prayers.” Christians gathered together, perhaps at regularly established times, and jointly brought their requests, intercessions, and thanksgiving to God.

In this little verse, we see a summary of the elements of public worship that have remained important to Christians



From **People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).

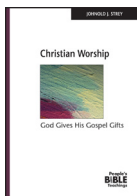


NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

throughout the ages: proclaiming the Word of God, receiving the Lord's Supper, expressing our fellowship by our common confession of faith, and offering prayers on behalf of one another and for a wide range of concerns.

Acts 2:42 describes the activity of the first Christian believers. Another key verse that guides Christian worship is Colossians 3:16. In the middle of a section with several encouragements for Christian living, Paul says, "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts." The "message of Christ" is Paul's expression for the gospel—the good news that Jesus Christ entered our world, fulfilled God's law perfectly in our place, suffered on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin, and rose from the dead to demonstrate his victory over sin and death. Notice how Paul urged the Colossians to let the gospel be present among them as they taught and admonished one another through the "psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" that they sang as a congregation. Their music in public worship was not merely a personal expression of praise. Rather their songs had a teaching purpose for the entire assembly.<sup>5</sup>

Paul's letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians are very similar. There is a statement in Ephesians that closely parallels Paul's thoughts in Colossians 3:16. Ephesians 5:19,20 says, "[Speak] to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice the first words from Paul's statement in Ephesians: "[Speak] to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs." Paul indicates that Christians' singing is not only directed



From **People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

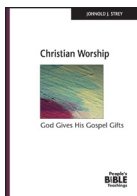
to God but also to each another. We praise God for the gospel, the message that brings us to faith and brings us his forgiveness. As we praise God, we proclaim the very same gospel message that strengthens us and our brothers and sisters in faith.

Paul's words in Colossians and Ephesians underscore an observable pattern and encouragement in Scripture: We praise God when we proclaim the gospel.

Another New Testament letter written by Saint Paul offers us further guidance as we study the purpose of worship. In 1 Corinthians, Paul discusses the matter of speaking in tongues. The miraculous ability to speak in another language was a special gift that the Holy Spirit gave to the infant Christian church, presumably to aid the rapid spread of the gospel in the church's initial years. Unfortunately, some of the Corinthians who had received this unique spiritual gift took pride in themselves simply because they had this gift. Paul corrects their thinking with these words:

A person who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. So what is to be done? I will pray using my spirit, and I will pray also using my understanding. I will sing using my spirit, and I will sing also using my understanding. Otherwise, how will an uninformed person say the "Amen" after you give thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? To be sure, you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. (1 Corinthians 14:13-17 EHV)

Notice Paul's concern that the words spoken in public worship should edify everyone who has gathered. Praising God in a language unknown to others in the assembly may have seemed outwardly impressive. Unfortunately, a message that could not be understood was a message that



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).

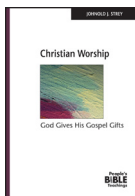


NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

would not edify the gathered congregation. Paul went on to say, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Corinthians 14:18,19). Paul’s encouragement directed the Corinthians to ensure that the words they spoke in their worship gatherings built each other up in faith. This encouragement applied not only to their proclamation of God’s Word but also to their statements of praise for God’s grace.

There are several fine examples of praise that proclaims God’s grace surrounding the story of Jesus’ birth in the Gospel of Luke. An angel appeared to Zechariah in Luke 1:5-25 to tell him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son in their old age, and their son would be the forerunner of the Messiah. Zechariah did not believe the angel’s message. As punishment for failing to believe God’s messenger, Zechariah’s ability to speak was taken from him until the birth of his son, John the Baptist. Once his speech was restored, some of his first words were a statement of praise to God for the salvation he was about to bring to his people. “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:68,69). Zechariah’s song, sometimes called by its Latin title, “Benedictus,” has been adapted by Christians for use in the historic prayer service called *Matins* or Morning Prayer (*Christian Worship: Hymnal*, pages 207-214).

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is also visited by the angel Gabriel in the same chapter. The angel informs her that she will be the mother of Jesus, the Son of God and promised Savior. Mary travels to visit her relative Elizabeth. During her visit, she also sang a song of praise to God. Like



From *People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



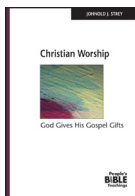
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

Zechariah's song, Mary's song also praises God for his specific acts of grace and goodness.

“My soul glorifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.  
His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation. . . .  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.”  
(Luke 1:46-50,54,55)

The song of Mary, like the song of Zechariah, has also been used in Christian worship for centuries. Mary's song, known by its Latin title, “Magnificat,” has been associated with the service called *Vespers* or Evening Prayer (*Christian Worship: Hymnal*, pages 215-224). In these songs, we see further New Testament examples of praise that proclaims the gracious works of God.

The last book of the Bible provides another example of the connection between praise and proclamation. In Revelation, the apostle John sees a vision of the church and all creation praising God. They praise the Lamb of God, who is about to take a scroll in John's vision and open it to reveal what will occur in the future. They sing, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (Revelation



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



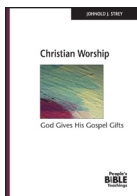
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

5:9,10). Jesus, the Lamb of God, receives praise from the church and from all creation because he shed his blood on the cross to redeem the world from sin and bring us into the family of God.

### ***Praise and proclamation***

One of the difficulties with the English word *worship* is that it does not adequately describe what happens when Christians gather together. The verb *worship* implies an activity that we direct toward God. It is true that believers direct their praises to God when they gather together publicly. But we have seen from Scripture that worship, in the narrow sense of simply praising God, is not all that occurs when believers are gathered. Believers proclaimed the saving acts of God through the ceremonies of the Old Testament and the apostles' teachings in the New Testament. Even as believers worshiped God in response to his saving work, their worship echoed back to him the very things he has done to save them from sin.

Imagine that you have just received a birthday or Christmas gift from a relative. If you wrote a thank-you note to the giver, what words would you use to express your gratitude? "Thank you very much. I just love the gift. I feel so appreciated when I think about it. I really want you to know how grateful I feel." Even though these words show your appreciation, they say nothing about the gift that was given. The giver cannot even tell that you received the gift from these words. How about this: "Thank you very much. Your gift was wonderful, thoughtful, considerate, and heartfelt. When I received it, I could tell just how much sincerity was behind your gift. Thank you for your kindness." These words focus more on the giver than the recipient, but they still say nothing about



From ***People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).

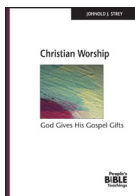


NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

the gift. We can still do better than that. “Thank you very much. I truly appreciated the gift certificate to the department store that you gave me. I plan to buy the kids some new clothes since they grow out of their old ones so quickly! I appreciate your thoughtfulness.” That’s better! When you express appreciation to someone for a gift, your words of thanks would seem empty if you did not thank him or her for *the specific gift* that was given.

In worship, we receive the gift of God’s forgiveness. His grace is proclaimed to us. We naturally respond to God’s gift and express our thanks. Just as it is natural to thank others for the specific gifts they have given us, so it is also natural to praise God by specifically citing his grace and forgiveness toward us. When we do that, we not only praise and thank God, but the gospel message we proclaim edifies our own souls and the souls of our gathered Christian brothers and sisters. We continue the same pattern of praise that proclaims the saving deeds of Christ that we see repeatedly in the Scriptures. Simply stated, praise is proclamation.

Consider another illustration. Your daughter has just participated in a piano recital. After countless hours of drilling and practicing, she flawlessly performs her piece before the audience. The next day, a friend calls you on the telephone, and you catch up on one another’s family activities. During the conversation, you describe your daughter’s performance: “She was the third-to-last student to perform in the program. She sat down confidently and played her piece perfectly. You should have heard the way she brought the emotion out of the music. She made us very proud!” Your description of your daughter’s performance proclaimed what she had done, but in the process of describing her playing, you also praised her for the good performance she gave.



From *People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



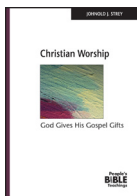
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE



This anecdote from everyday life is also true in our worship. Proclaiming what God has done for us is the starting point of public worship, but we can hardly separate our proclamation of God's deeds from our praise. When the minister preaches the gospel in his sermon, he is not only proclaiming God's Word to us, but his words also praise God for forgiving us through Jesus Christ. When worshipers recite the Creed together, their words of proclamation also praise God for sending his Son to be our Savior. Just as praise is proclamation, so proclamation is praise.

Our observation of Scripture leads us to this conclusion about Christian worship. When believers gather for worship, their purpose is to proclaim the good news about forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ. As believers proclaim the saving work of Jesus, they are also praising him for what he has done for them. When believers respond to the gospel's good news of forgiveness by praising God, they naturally praise him by proclaiming the very same good news that fills their hearts with gratitude.

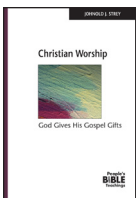
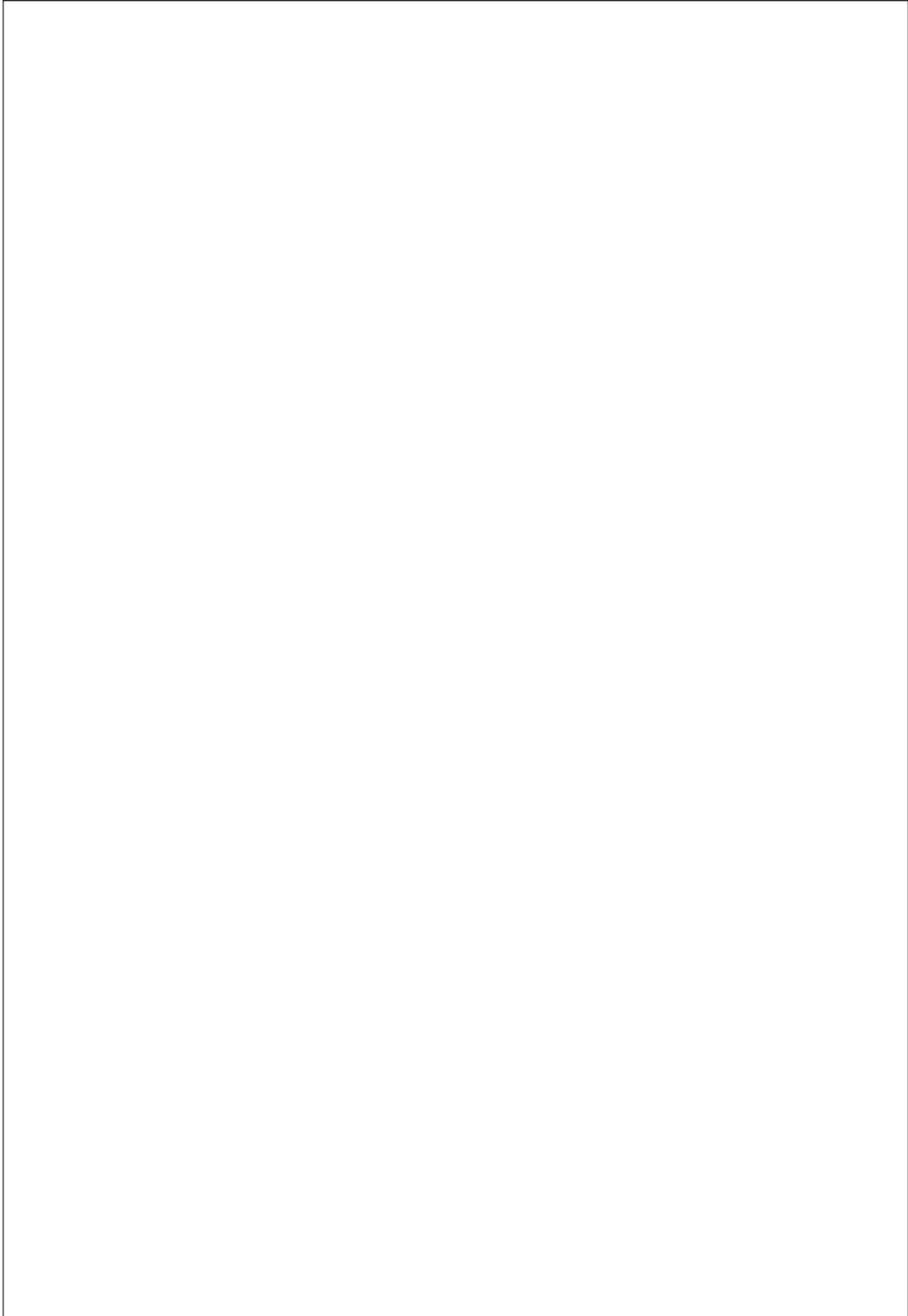
When Christians proclaim the gospel in public worship, they are praising God; and when Christians praise God in public worship, they do so by proclaiming the gospel.



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



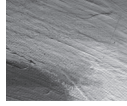
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE



From **People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

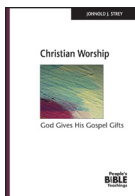


## 2

### The Gospel in Worship<sup>6</sup>

Two friends, Christians from different churches, discuss and compare their experiences each week when they go to church. The first person says, “The highlight of our Sunday worship is hearing the Word of God in the Bible readings and the sermon.” The second person asks, “Isn’t the most important part of worship the fact that we come together to praise God? After all, that’s what the word *worship* means in the dictionary.”

The second friend’s question in this scenario is a common thought. English dictionaries list the word *worship* as both a noun and a verb. As a noun, worship refers to religious practices with creeds and rituals. As a verb, worship describes the respect, honor, and praise that people direct toward God. Notice that the English verb to worship does



From **People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



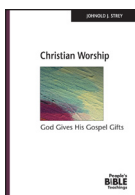
not necessarily imply the same gospel-proclaiming emphasis discovered from our study of Scripture in chapter 1. We learned that believers' primary purpose is to proclaim the gospel when they gather for worship. Just as the Greek words commonly translated as "worship" do not fully capture the purpose of Christian worship gatherings, so the English word *worship* does not adequately define the purpose of worship described in the Bible.

In chapter 1, we learned that believers gather together to proclaim the gospel and to respond to the gospel with praise and thanks. Even in their response, Christians proclaim the gospel. The main purpose of worship is to proclaim the gospel. In this chapter we will explore the way that Christians proclaim the gospel in public worship. In order to do that, we must begin with a basic understanding of law and gospel, the two central teachings in Scripture. We must also understand how God applies the gospel to our hearts through the means of grace. Once this groundwork is laid, we can appreciate how and why the gospel is proclaimed in public worship.

### ***Law and gospel***

A person feels sick. The symptoms remain for some time. He decides to schedule an appointment with his doctor to determine the cause of his illness. The doctor examines the patient. The tests reveal a serious ailment. Fortunately, there is medication to fight off the illness. Although the patient did not enjoy hearing the doctor's diagnosis, he is relieved to have an antidote for his medical problem.

This scenario illustrates the relationship between law and gospel, the two main teachings of Scripture. The law is like the illness; the gospel is like the medication. No



From ***People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).

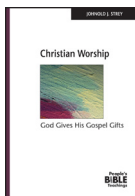


NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

one likes to hear the full extent of the law's diagnosis, for it reveals a serious spiritual disease within us. But a proper diagnosis of the law will help us understand that the gospel is the perfect and only medicine for our ailment. In order for us to understand the proper use of the gospel in Christian worship, we must first understand the relationship between law and gospel in Scripture.

The law explains what God expects from all people. The Ten Commandments, first given to the people of Israel in Exodus 20, describe the standards God has set for humankind. Jesus succinctly summarized the Commandments when he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37,39). God commands that nothing become more important to us than him. He further commands that we show love and respect to everyone just as we love ourselves and expect respect from others. This command from God is not merely a suggestion for daily living; it is a demand that God requires us to fulfill perfectly. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). God told the ancient Israelites through Moses, "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).

Even a passing glance at your life's story shows how far short you have come from meeting the perfect demands of a holy God. Like the doctor's diagnosis for an ill patient, the law reveals our diagnosis: We are sinners who fail to love God and our neighbors perfectly. Saint Paul wrote, "No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin" (Romans 3:20). God's law reveals the sobering truth that our sinful behavior is the symptom of



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



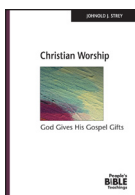
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

sin's disease within our hearts from our first moment of existence. King David lamented in Psalm 51:5, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." Just as a serious illness left untreated may result in death, the disease of sin brings its own set of deadly consequences. "The wages of sin is death," Saint Paul informs us (Romans 6:23). The death Paul has in mind is not only physical death, but also eternal death—permanent separation from the love and blessings of God in hell, where souls suffer the eternal wrath of God because of their sin.

The diagnosis we hear from the law leaves nothing to celebrate. When we see the standards of God's law and recognize our inability to achieve them even with our best efforts, we are left to despair. Like the apostle Paul, our souls cry out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (Romans 7:24). But this is the point God wants us to reach! God wants us to reach the point of despair over our sin, because then the gospel will be able to do its healing work in our souls.

The word *gospel* comes from a combination of the old English words *god* and *spell*, which mean "good news." With souls crushed by the law, the gospel message God brings to us in his Word is truly good news! The apostle Paul summarizes the gospel at the beginning of the resurrection chapter of the Bible:

Brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

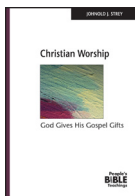
according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.  
(1 Corinthians 15:1-4)

The gospel is a historical fact. Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, entered our world to be our Savior from sin's eternal consequences. Just as the Old Testament Scriptures had predicted, Jesus sacrificed his life on the cross where he endured the punishment that God has prescribed for our sin. Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, the prophet Isaiah previewed Jesus' death and revealed its purpose: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). With the penalty for our sin completely satisfied, God the Father raised his Son from the dead on Easter morning as definitive proof that Jesus had accomplished the world's salvation.

The demands and punishments of God's law would have left us in despair over our sin. The gospel reveals the wonderful truth that Jesus obeyed the law perfectly in our place, paid the penalty for our sins by his death, and promises forgiveness and eternal life to all who believe in him as their Savior. What a wonderful gift Christ has given us in the gospel!

### *The means of grace*

A grandmother knits a sweater for her granddaughter as a Christmas present. Because she lives hundreds of miles away from her granddaughter, she cannot present the gift to her in person. So she carefully wraps the sweater, packs it in a box, and ships it to her granddaughter's address. Her heartfelt and handmade gift wouldn't do much good if her granddaughter didn't receive it. The shipping company is



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



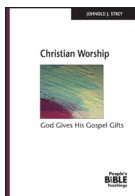
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

the means that delivers the grandmother's Christmas gift to her granddaughter.

Jesus' death has paid for the sins of the world. He won forgiveness for all mankind and proved his victory over death by his resurrection. But the gift of Christ's forgiveness cannot benefit our souls if we do not receive it. Just as the shipping company was the means that the grandmother used to deliver her gift, so God also uses means to deliver the gospel's forgiveness to individual souls. God uses the means of grace to present us with his gospel gifts. The means of grace is the gospel delivered to us in God's Word and in the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

### ***The Word***

God's Word proclaims the gospel message about Jesus Christ, our Savior. Jesus left no doubt about the purpose of the Old Testament Scriptures when he said, "These are the very Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). The apostle John spoke just as clearly about the purpose of his Gospel record of Jesus' life: "These [words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). The Bible's gospel facts also contain the gospel's power to bring people to faith in Christ and to deliver them his forgiveness and salvation. The apostle Paul boldly proclaimed, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). In the most well-known verse in the Bible, Jesus shows us that the gospel message is the means God uses to create faith and deliver his eternal blessings to us. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only



From ***People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



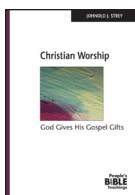
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE



Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The gospel message in God’s Word is proclaimed in a wide variety of ways:<sup>7</sup>

- The gospel is proclaimed when we read the Scriptures: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. . . . We write this to make our joy complete” (1 John 1:1,4).
- The gospel is proclaimed in preaching. The risen Jesus said to his disciples, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15).
- The gospel is proclaimed when we teach and explain the Word of God to others. In Acts 8, the Ethiopian official’s question about a section in Isaiah’s book provided Philip with an opportunity to explain the gospel. “The eunuch asked Philip, ‘Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?’ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:34,35).
- The gospel is proclaimed when a believer forgives the sins of another. On the evening of Easter Sunday, Jesus announced to his disciples, “If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:23).
- The gospel is proclaimed personally when a believer ponders its message in his heart: “The



From **People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



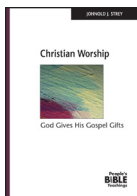
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart” (Romans 10:8).

- The gospel can even be proclaimed through pictures and symbols. Just before Jesus’ famous statement in John 3:16, he used an Old Testament incident to picture his coming sacrifice: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him” (John 3:14,15).

Although the gospel is proclaimed in many different ways, its power and purpose remain the same in all circumstances. The gospel brings people to faith in Jesus, sustains them in faith, and delivers the forgiveness of sins and promise of eternal life to all who believe it.

The Word of God contains the gospel, and so we recognize that the Word of God is a means of grace. We need to remember, however, that the Word of God contains law as well. A Christian may explain a point of moral teaching from the Bible to someone else, but if he does not explain how Jesus kept God’s law perfectly and offered his life as payment for our sins, then the conversation does not present the gospel. A pastor may preach a sermon based on the Word of God, but if his sermon has not taken people to the cross and empty tomb of Jesus, then his sermon has not used the means of grace. Scripture contains both law and gospel. Both are essential, but only one can deliver God’s grace into our hearts. The law condemns, but the gospel consoles. The law shows our need for Christ’s forgiveness, but the gospel actually brings us Christ’s forgiveness.



From *People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



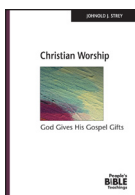
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

### *The sacraments*

A married couple expresses their love for each other in multiple ways. They say to each other, “I love you.” On the day of their wedding, they exchange rings as a symbol of their commitment to love each other throughout their lives. A kiss and a hug, a birthday present, flowers on their anniversary, dinner at their favorite restaurant for a special occasion—these are all ways that the couple expresses their love for each other.

God also expresses his love and grace to us in multiple ways. The gospel in the Word of God is not the only way God delivers his grace to us. The means of grace also include the sacraments. The common Lutheran definition of a sacrament includes three aspects: A sacrament is (1) an act instituted by Christ, which (2) uses an earthly element and (3) offers and gives us the forgiveness of sins. By this definition, there are two sacraments: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. In the sacraments, God brings the very same forgiveness that he presents to us in his Word. The grace is the same; only the means are different.

Jesus instituted Baptism shortly before his ascension into heaven. In the Great Commission, Jesus told his disciples that the Word and Baptism were two means to bring people into the holy Christian church. Jesus said to his disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19,20). As the words of Jesus are spoken and the waters of Baptism are applied to a person, God miraculously adopts that person into his family of believers and personally applies his gifts of forgiveness and eternal life to him or her. On Pentecost, the birthday of the Christian church, Peter declared to the



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



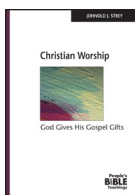
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

crowds, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Luther summarizes Baptism’s power as a means of grace in the Small Catechism: “Baptism works forgiveness of sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.”<sup>8</sup>

Baptism is much like a wedding ring: It is a one-time gift from God, but it points us to God’s ongoing love and commitment to us every day of our lives. Luther encouraged believers to view their baptism as their status before God and not merely as a past incident in their lives. Luther wrote in his Large Catechism, “When our sins and conscience oppress us, we strengthen ourselves and take comfort and say, ‘Nevertheless, I am baptized. And if I am baptized, it is promised to me that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.’”<sup>9</sup>

Baptism makes us holy in God’s sight, clothing us in the perfect righteousness of Jesus. Through faith created in our hearts by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, we are God’s forgiven and redeemed children. But this wonderful truth does not negate the reality that we continue to struggle against sin. We return to our baptism to find strength to fight against our sinful nature and the sinful temptations all around us. Saint Paul notes that Baptism connects us to Jesus’ death and resurrection. This connection enables us to fight against sin’s temptations. Paul wrote:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried



From *People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



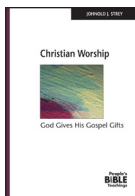
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:1-4).

One of the ways we revisit the blessings of Baptism is through confession and absolution. In the previous section, we saw that God's Word delivers his grace in a variety of ways. One of those ways is when a pastor or another Christian announces Christ's forgiveness to us. The formal term for this announcement is called absolution. When Christian believers confess their sin, whether privately to another person or corporately in worship, and when the absolution is proclaimed, they have essentially revisited their baptism. Absolution takes us back to the promise of God's forgiveness that we first received in our baptism. Luther writes,

When we rise from our sins or repent, we are merely returning to the power and the faith of baptism from which we fell, and finding our way back to the promise then made to us, which we deserted when we sinned. For the truth of the promise once made remains steadfast, always ready to receive us back with open arms when we return.<sup>10</sup>

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1530), an official doctrinal statement of the Lutheran church, absolution is described as a sacrament: "Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Absolution (which is the Sacrament of Repentance) are truly Sacraments. For these rites have God's command and the promise of grace."<sup>11</sup> Some prefer to work with a slightly broader definition of a sacrament, omitting the idea of an earthly element. Since the definition of the term is not prescribed in the Bible, there is nothing wrong with using a narrower or broader definition, although it is wise for us to agree to a common definition.



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

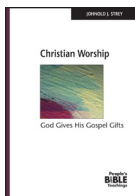
Luther used a broader definition earlier in his ministry but later preferred the narrow definition. What matters most is not our working definition of a sacrament, or whether we view absolution as a sacrament or simply as an extension of the Word of God. What matters most is that we view Baptism and absolution as means of grace through which God applies his grace to our souls.

Holy Baptism is a special one-time gift of God's grace with ongoing meaning and significance for our faith. By contrast, Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper, is a gift of God's grace that we receive again and again. Jesus' institution of Holy Communion is recorded in the first three gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—and by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians. The following quotation synthesizes Jesus' words from these four New Testament books into the Words of Institution:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night he was betrayed, took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."<sup>12</sup>

There are several important truths we can note from Jesus' words of institution. Jesus tells his disciples that the bread and wine in Holy Communion are more than ordinary bread and wine. They are also the very body and blood of Jesus, once given on the cross and now given to us again in a miraculous but real manner. Although many have tried to interpret Jesus' words to suggest that the bread and wine are not actually his body and blood, Luther



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



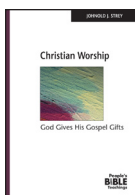
NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

reminds us that God's Word is more powerful than any human opinions.

With this Word you can strengthen your conscience and say, "If a hundred thousand devils, together with all fanatics, should rush forward, crying, 'How can bread and wine be Christ's body and blood?' and such, I know that all spirits and scholars together are not as wise as is the Divine Majesty in His little finger." Now here stands Christ's Word, "Take, eat; this is My body. . . . Drink of it, all of you; this is My blood of the new testament," and so on. Here we stop to watch those who will call themselves His masters and make the matter different from what He has spoken. It is true, indeed, that if you take away the Word or regard the Sacrament without the words, you have nothing but mere bread and wine. But if the words remain with them, as they shall and must, then, by virtue of the words, it is truly Christ's body and blood. What Christ's lips say and speak, so it is. He can never lie or deceive.<sup>13</sup>

Not only does Holy Communion present us with Jesus' body and blood, but it also delivers his forgiveness to us in yet another way. On the night he instituted Holy Communion, Jesus distributed the cup to his disciples and said, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:27,28). The forgiveness Jesus brings in the Lord's Supper is the same grace and forgiveness we receive when we hear his Word and when we were baptized into his name; but in this sacred meal, his forgiveness comes to us in a unique and tangible way.

Like Baptism, Holy Communion is a sacrament. Unlike Baptism, Holy Communion is something that Jesus invites us to receive repeatedly. In Paul's account of the Words of Institution, Jesus invites us to "do this" repeatedly. "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

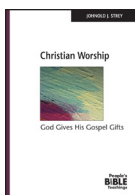
me. . . . This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:24,25). Although the statement, “Do this, whenever you drink it,” does not mandate a specific frequency for our participation, the blessings of this sacrament encourage us to receive it frequently. Luther reminds us why frequent reception of the Lord’s Supper is such a valuable blessing:

By Baptism we are first born anew. But, as we said before, there still remains the old vicious nature of flesh and blood in mankind. There are so many hindrances and temptations of the devil and of the world that we often become weary and faint, and sometimes we also stumble. Therefore, the Sacrament is given as a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself so that it will not fall back in such a battle, but become ever stronger and stronger. . . . Now to this purpose the comfort of the Sacrament is given when the heart feels that the burden is becoming too heavy, so that it may gain here new power and refreshment.<sup>14</sup>

In the Word of God and the words of absolution, in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, Jesus graciously comes to us and brings us the forgiveness of sins that he won for us on the cross 2,000 years ago. Apart from these means of grace, we do not receive Christ’s blessings. Through these means of grace, the Holy Spirit works and sustains faith that receives the grace of God through Jesus’ redeeming work.

### *The means of grace in worship*

God’s people use the gospel in a number of different settings. We explain law and gospel to others in our personal witness and our congregations’ evangelism efforts. We apply the gospel to people personally in counseling. We



From *People’s Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

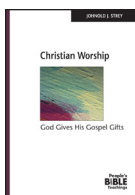


build up and increase our knowledge of the gospel in Bible classes and other educational settings. The gospel is put to work in each one of these situations, even though our specific objective varies.

We also put the gospel to work in public worship. In two different letters to his coworker Timothy, the apostle Paul told him that the reading and preaching of God's Word should be a part of his ministry. Paul wrote, "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching," (1 Timothy 4:13) and, "Preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2). In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul envisions Christians proclaiming the gospel to one another as they praise God for his grace: "[Speak] to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:19).

Holy Communion is also a natural element of public worship, because its very nature is a communal activity. Referring to the single loaf of bread that commonly was used by early Christian worship assemblies, Paul notes the communal nature of the sacrament: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17). Because the Lord's Supper expresses unity among those who participate in it together, it is naturally included in public worship.

Does this repeated use of the gospel seem redundant? We received forgiveness when we were baptized. We learn about the gospel in Sunday school, Catechism classes, and Bible study classes. In worship, the gospel is proclaimed in absolution, the Scripture readings, the sermon, the Creed, the Lord's Supper, and even the hymns and songs we sing. Do we really need to revisit the same gospel message through the same means of grace over and over again in worship?



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).

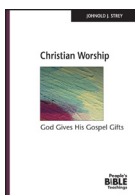


NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

If the gospel were only a fact that we learned and remembered, perhaps we would only need to hear it occasionally. But the gospel is so much more than a fact to remember; it is spiritual power. In Romans 1:16, Paul describes the gospel's powerful quality to bring Christ's salvation to all who believe its message: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes." The gospel message about Christ brings people to faith in him: "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Romans 10:17). This powerful message encompassed the apostle's ministry and preaching. Paul told the Corinthians, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). There was no doubt in Paul's mind that believers should encounter the gospel regularly to keep their faith strong and vibrant.

Our bodies need proper nutrition to function well. Most of us eat three meals a day so that we have the nutrients and energy we need for daily life. If someone suggested that people really don't need to eat because they already know how to eat and they have tasted food before, we would find that suggestion bizarre at best and dangerous at worst. Eating is not about head knowledge; it provides necessary nourishment for the body!

Our sinful nature tries to convince us that the gospel is just head knowledge instead of something we need to *consume* regularly for good spiritual health. But the new self inside our hearts sees the gospel as necessary food for the soul! Our new self delights to dine at the Savior's gospel banquet in Word and sacrament. Our new self loves to return to the simple gospel message and receive forgiveness and strength from Christ again and again. Our



From **People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts** by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).

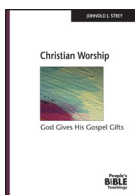


NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE

new self never tires of receiving ongoing spiritual nourishment when we study, ponder, and learn about the grace of God. As we proclaim the gospel and administer the Lord's Supper in public worship, our new self rejoices to hear the good news of Christ's saving and redeeming work. And unlike a physical meal, we cannot consume too much gospel! We cannot overdose on the forgiveness of sins! What a blessing Christ gives us as we encounter his means of grace each week in worship!

Luke's gospel includes the familiar account of Jesus visiting the home of Mary and Martha. As Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his Word, her sister Martha criticized her because she did not help to prepare the meal they were about to eat. Although there was nothing wrong with meal preparation, there was nothing more important than hearing Jesus, the Word who became flesh, explain the Word of God. Jesus said to Martha, "You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41,42).

There is nothing more important than hearing the gospel. There is nothing more important than receiving Christ's grace through the means of grace. There is nothing more important than the forgiveness of sins that Jesus delivers to our souls through his Word and sacraments. In public worship, we proclaim the gospel that Christ has given to us. Pastors will do well to make gospel proclamations the heart of their preaching and worship planning. Parishioners will do well to expect that their pastors present them with Christ's precious forgiveness every week in worship and preaching. Nothing else can give us the spiritual strength, power, nourishment, and peace we need than the gospel!



From *People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* by Johnold J. Strey © 2021 Northwestern Publishing House. All rights reserved. May only be reproduced and used with the Bible study *Living My Life as a Christian*. Further reproduction and distribution is prohibited. Book available for purchase at [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) (item #1500831).



NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE