

Exploring Faith and Worship with Christians Around the World
Emily R. Brink and Paul Detterman

Wise Church



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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Introduction

A song from Canada

Come, now is the time to worship;
come, now is the time to give your heart.
Come just as you are to worship;
come just as you are before your God.
Come.

One day every tongue will confess you are God.
One day every knee will bow,
still the greatest treasure remains for those
who gladly choose you now.

Come, now is the time to worship;
come, now is the time to give your heart.
Come just as you are to worship;
come just as you are before your God.
Come.

From: "Come, Now Is The Time to Worship"
Words: Brian Doerksen © 1998 Vineyard Songs, admin. in North America by Music Services, Inc.

Welcome to this study! In these five sessions we'll take a look at what millions of people do each week as they gather for worship in many different places and in many different ways.

The way your congregation worships is both similar to and different from the way other Christian communities worship, whether they're across the street or across the world. So how can we speak of Christian worship in a way that gets at the root of what it means to worship God in community? In this study we will take a closer look at our own practices, viewed through "the bigger picture" that transcends any local setting.

Development of “Worshiping the Triune God”

Our basic text will be the document “Worshiping the Triune God” (WTG), a set of wisdom proverbs distilled from Scripture and gathered from people around the world. It was developed in preparation for the inaugural meeting of the World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2010. The leaders preparing for that meeting requested a document that could help root this new communion in a theology of worship. They observed, “The word *communion* in our new name needs to be rooted in worship, which is at the heart of our life together as Christians.” Their goal was that in all our diversity we may seek the unity of the body of Christ in our worship.

An international committee was appointed, early drafts were sent far and wide, and during the meetings of the World Communion of Reformed Churches held at Calvin College in June 2010, the final editing took place. “Worshiping the Triune God” has been translated into Chinese, Dutch, German, French, Indonesian, and Spanish, and is in the process of being translated into other languages as well. The entire document is included in this book beginning on page 9; it is also available in different languages at www.werc.ch or www.worship.calvin.edu.

Rather than producing an essay on the theology of worship, the committee turned to proverbs—a literary form rooted in wisdom literature and embedded in many cultures for millennia. Even today, proverbs help people around the world, especially those in oral cultures, pass down wisdom from one generation to the next (Google “Bangladesh proverbs,” for example). As we will see in the proverbs in this document, the framework for worship is blessing. We gather, not first of all to be blessed, but because God has *already* blessed us. In our worship together, more blessings await us (WTG 1.3).

A Word about This Study

Emily Brink was a member of the international committee that developed “Worshiping the Triune God,” and Paul Detterman wrote a number of articles in *Reformed Worship* (Reformed Worship.org) introducing its wisdom. Together they have now written this study—a conversation in dialogue with “Worshiping the Triune God.” Their hope is that churches far and near may develop a culture of learning about the central activity of the

Christian church: our worship of the God who has called us, loves us, blesses us, and to whom we offer our adoration and praise.

How we understand God and God's plans for us has a significant impact on what we anticipate and how we participate in worship. As this conversation progresses, we will have the opportunity to touch mystery, not only the great mystery of the Trinity but also the mystery of God's relationship with us and with all of creation. These proverbs about the worship of God, like Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God, help us find the trailhead as we begin to explore in greater depth the wonder, awe, beauty, and joy that awaits us.

Our goals for this study are:

- to gain a greater understanding of why we worship as we do.
- to increase our joy and deepen our fellowship with the triune God, who invites us to worship and meets us there.
- to acknowledge and celebrate unity in the body of Christ at the font and around the table, in our need for confession and experience of grace, and in our mutual language of praise, prayer, and faith profession.
- to affirm that we are called by God to worship in order that we can be sent by God to be and to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Structuring the Sessions

This study has five main sections, each one focusing on a different section of "Worshipping the Triune God." Those five sections reflect the shape of Christian worship of every time and place, regardless of style or setting: Gathering, Proclamation, Response, Celebrating, and Sending.

Each main section is divided into "A" and "B" subsections. The five "A" subsections examine the five sections of "Worshipping the Triune God." The five "B" subsections are entitled "Going Deeper," and offer additional opportunity for conversation and reflection.

We hope that worship committees, worship teams, pastors, elders, and adult education groups will find a place to approach

the conversation. There are many possible ways to structure the study sessions. For example:

- Schedule a five-week study, covering both the A and B subsections in one session.
- Schedule a ten-week study, addressing each A and B subsection in a separate session.
- Schedule two five-week studies, studying sessions 1-A through 5-A in the first study and sessions 1-B through 5-B in the second study.
- Use selected sections for mini-discussions on a particular aspect of worship (e.g., a focus on baptism or on the proclamation of God's Word).
- Use this study as a ten-month in-depth discussion for church leaders such as elders, deacons, and worship planners.

In whatever way you use this study, our hope is that it will open your eyes to the majesty, mystery, and wonder of worshiping the triune God, and that it will deepen your own discipleship so that others will more clearly see Christ living in you.

All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
the Son and Spirit blest, who reign in highest heaven—
the one eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore;
for thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.

From: "Now Thank We All Our God"

Words: Martin Rinkart, 1636; tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1863, alt., P.D.

Session 1: Gathering

A song from the United States

God, you call us to this place,
where we know your love and grace.
Here your hospitality makes of us one family,
makes our rich diversity richer still in unity,
makes our many voices one,
joined in praise with Christ your Son.

Now assembled in Christ's name,
all your mercies to proclaim—
in the hearing of your word,
in our prayer through Christ the Lord,
in the ministries we share,
learning how to serve with care—
in the Spirit let us be one in faith and unity.

In the water we were born of the Spirit in the Son.
Now a priestly, royal race rich in every gift of grace—
called, forgiven, loved, and freed,
for the world we intercede:
gather into unity all the human family.

From: "God, You Call Us to This Place"

Words: Delores Duffner (b. 1939) © 1993 The Sisters of St. Benedict, admin. OCP Publications
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Even in its simplest forms, Christian worship is multidimensional. Throughout the history of the church, disciples of Jesus experience at least three realities whenever we gather for worship:

1. We bring our context with us: trauma (natural disaster, violence, oppression, political upheaval, unemployment, relocation, death) combines with triumph (births,

graduations, new jobs, new relationships) to make us who we are on any given day. Even the most “stable” worshipping community will be “different” each time it gathers because our world is constantly changing and so are we.

2. Consciously or not, we are “logging on” to the unending worship of the triune God across creation and throughout time. No matter how edgy or how stodgy our particular worship may seem, no matter how connected or how isolated any group of worshippers may feel, we are all part of the cosmic reality hymn writer Maltbie Babcock called “the music of the spheres.”

3. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, we can participate in the communion of the triune God. This is possible because of the ongoing work of Jesus the Christ. James Torrance says, “There is only one offering which is truly acceptable to God, and it is not ours. It is the offering by which [Christ] has sanctified for all time those who come to God by him.”

—*Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*, by James B. Torrance
InterVarsity Press, 1996, p. 21

Authentic Christian worship, like the Word of God on which it is centered, is living, breathing, changing, vibrant, vital, refreshingly unpredictable, and always transformative. The blessing of worship, the life-changing experience of encountering and praising the Father, Son, and Spirit, is available to disciples of Jesus every time we gather. This blessing is not dependent on our resources, the beauty of our location, the approval of our culture, or any other temporal circumstance. It is a gift from God.

Session 1-A

1.1 Called by God: Why Gather?

Blessed are the people of God who are deeply aware that they are both called by and address the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects, and cares for the church through Word and Spirit—a God of splendour and majesty perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ, the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).

Blessed is the community that gratefully acknowledges that the triune God not only receives our worship, but also makes our worship possible, prompting us through the Holy Spirit, and sanctifying our offerings through the perfect priesthood of Jesus Christ, who during his life on earth offered praise to the Father, “full of joy in the Holy Spirit” (Luke 10:21), and even now “ever lives to pray for us” (Heb. 7:25).

Blessed is the congregation that insists that believers gather to worship God not, first of all, in order that God might bless them, but because God has already blessed them.

Blessed is the congregation that then discovers that God does indeed bless them as they worship the triune God who nourishes, teaches, convicts, and corrects them, and strengthens bonds that unite believers with Jesus Christ and with each other through the sanctifying actions of the proclamation of the Word and corporate prayer, through baptism and the Lord’s Supper, through fellowship, offerings, and testimony.



☛ Easter Sunday morning, 2008, in a village church in China

Taken seriously, these first four proverbs alone would be enough to rock the world of many contemporary worshipers. This is especially the case in North America where, nurtured by a consumer culture, people have come to believe that if they choose to worship God at all, it is because they have taken the initiative. “God should be pleased that we have made that choice,” they think. How ironic that people would consider worshipping the triune God and yet be self-absorbed!

To quote C.S. Lewis, “like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea,” (*The Weight of Glory*, The Macmillan Company, 1949, p. 2), we can easily miss the astonishing truth that God is deeply invested in a relationship with us. The Creator of every universe that has ever existed revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ; the Spirit who hovered over precreation chaos is the same Spirit that drags us out of bed (or out of ourselves) and into a posture of praise.

TESTIMONY

“Every Sunday is received with expectation. We begin with something like, ‘We have been called by God today to . . .’ And then the joy inside of us bursts out and we begin our worship in song. We cannot worship God only with our heads and with our arms folded. Praise, for us, is the physical expression of our gratitude.”

—Eduardo Gonzales, Tegucigalpa, Honduras

God created us to worship. Worship is our home, praise is our voice, and prayer is the air our lungs were designed to breathe! God calls us to worship and makes our worship possible. We do not love, serve, or worship God in order to attract his attention, avoid his wrath, or secure his blessing. God, in Jesus Christ, has come to us, redeemed us, and blessed us. It’s a done deal. Worship is a “sacrifice of praise”—our grateful response to these blessings.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why might those who are intentional in worship be “blessed?” What helpful parallels can you draw between these proverbs and Jesus’ teaching in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12)?

2. How does your congregation gather? How would a visitor describe the spirit of the gathering? Would it be clear that you gather in response to God's invitation, with joy for what God has already done?

3. As your congregation gathers for worship, how do you celebrate the great reality of

- God's splendor and majesty?
- God's perfect revelation in Jesus Christ?
- God's activity as the Holy Spirit moves through the congregation?

1.2 Corporate Assembly—the Whole People of God: Who Gathers?

Wise is the worshiping community that “does not neglect meeting together” (Heb. 10:25), but joyfully gathers in Jesus' name, eager to proclaim the Word of God, to offer praise and prayer, and to celebrate the sacraments, each of which are actions of the whole people of God, “the royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Blessed is the congregation that invites all worshipers—including those which our cultures may label in different ways as “disabled”—to full, conscious, and active participation in corporate worship, engaging heart, soul, and mind in devotion to God, deeply aware of how their own personal worship participates in a much larger chorus of praise to God.

Blessed is the congregation that expresses in its worship the communion in the body of Christ, the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and the oneness that is the gift and calling of God that unites the young and old and believers of every time and place who share a common calling by the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ.



➡ Praising God in Pakistan



➡ Worship in a poor village in Pakistan



➡ Bangladeshi Christians praising God in worship

As important as the “why” of worship is the question of “who” shows up; what attitudes, expectations, and hopes do we bring with us?

If we center our hearts on the person and work of Jesus Christ, eagerly proclaiming God’s Word and joyfully celebrating the sacraments, we create a countercultural community—a gathering of uncommon joy, compassion, and welcome. Does this describe

your congregation, or do you long for worship that offers something more? Passionate worship, inspired by the Holy Spirit and oblivious to the demon of self-consciousness, is something that disciples of Jesus in the West can learn from our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world. But learning to worship with freedom from cultural constraints takes wisdom. It is here, at the beginning of section 1.2 of “Worshiping the Triune God,” that wisdom joins the conversation.

Wisdom—as distinct from knowledge, regulation, tradition, formula, or even “blessing”—is what gives disciples of Jesus the ability to flourish regardless of their circumstances. A congregation is wise to make joy-infused worship the center of their life together. The discipline of regular worship is where disciples are nurtured, spiritual growth and life transitions are marked, and the “royal priesthood” of God’s people is both formed and strengthened.

Such a wise congregation will be blessed all the more as they recognize and encourage the many and varied gifts and talents of their “priests.” But many contemporary people have become accustomed to “professional” leadership. They are content to be the recipients of professionally produced sporting and entertainment events and discriminating consumers of professionally franchised merchandise. It’s not a stretch, then, for people who come to the “worship event” to leave leadership and even active participation to “professional” worship leaders and to be underwhelmed, if not somewhat embarrassed, by home-grown expressions of praise, prayer, or proclamation. But there is great blessing in allowing the dialect of our community to become the language of our worship, and encouraging the particular gifts of those gathered for worship to shape our corporate encounter with the triune God.

When a worshiping community is drawn lovingly and persistently into active participation, worship can arise more naturally from every heart, mind, and tongue; from young and old; rich and poor; men and women; in word, song, image, sign, and posture. And when attention is paid to people with special giftedness and/or special needs, the grace-filled embrace of the triune God is extended, and the Holy Spirit will most certainly provide unexpected blessings.

TESTIMONY

“Our Freewill Fellowship has been growing steadily from a small group of physically and /or mentally handicapped brothers and sisters to about 300. From young to old, they attend fellowship and worship services with the help of many devoted volunteers. They are usually the most enthusiastic participants in the worship services! Their choir occasionally sings in the worship services; their heartfelt singing is way too beautiful to imagine. Hallelujah! We are blessed and completed by their presence and testimonies.”

—Yvette Lau, Hong Kong

Questions for Reflection

1. Participating in “the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3) is a significant goal for the witness of the twenty-first-century Church around the globe. What is the basis of the unity expressed in section 1.2? How can we more closely achieve this kind of unity through our worship?
2. What special gifts might people who have disabilities bring into a worshiping community? In what ways might they experience and share a rich relationship with the triune God?
3. What “disabilities” do you personally bring to your participation in worship?
4. In what ways is your congregation encouraged to be good hosts to visitors, especially those perceived as being “different”?

1.3 The Holy Spirit: “Who” Else Is There?

Wise is the worshipping community that recognizes how the Holy Spirit works through both reason and emotion, through both spiritual disciplines and surprising events, through both services that are prayerfully planned and through moments of spontaneous discovery.

Wise is the worshipping community that recognizes that the lasting value or spiritual power of worship does not depend upon our own creativity, imagination, intellect, or emotions, but comes from the Holy Spirit, who may choose to use any or all of these things. For, truly, worship is a gift to receive, not an accomplishment to achieve.

“. . . Worship is a gift to receive, not an accomplishment to achieve.” This one sentence, and the proverb containing it, provides the wisdom that signals a non-negotiable cease-fire to the unfortunately named “worship wars” many have endured. The Holy Spirit can and may choose to work through the head, the heart, the body, the rehearsal, the “accident,” the prayer book, the spontaneous intercession, the organ, the drums, the banners, the lights, the hymnals, the screen . . . or none of the above.

Questions for Reflection

1. How broad and welcoming is your congregation’s experience of worship? Where do you see the most evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of your worshipping community?
2. Individual disciples of Jesus are unique. In the same way, every gathering of worshipers develops its own “personality.” How does your congregation balance careful preparation with spontaneity, attempting to reach both the head and the heart of worshipers?
3. Where might the Holy Spirit be challenging you to grow in your experience of the fullness of the gospel as it is embodied in worship?

Prayer

God of all time, Father, Son, and Spirit,
in every generation you call people to worship,
inviting, inspiring, and instructing;
naming, nourishing, and nurturing;
uniting us with one another and with you.

Thank you for the gift of worship.

We pray for your wisdom
so that we may receive your blessings
with a full and grateful heart.

May all we say and do bring glory to you
and shalom to a shattered world.

We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.



PHOTO BY PAUL DETTERMAN

➦ Aboriginal church choir festival in Changhua, Taiwan



➔ Tech room in a large Hong Kong church

Worship wisdom from the global church

Blessed is the congregation
that expresses in its worship
the communion in the body of Christ,
the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,
and the oneness that is the gift and calling of God
that unites the young and old
and believers of every time and place
who share a common calling by the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ.

—“Worshiping the Triune God,” section 1.2

The church of Jesus Christ is a global church. In *Wise Church*, you’re invited to enter a conversation about worship that draws on the wisdom and experience of Christians around the world.

Based on the document “Worshiping the Triune God,” a collection of proverbs on worship adopted by the World Communion of Reformed Churches, this book and study guide offers a global perspective on how and why we worship.

With pictures, testimonies, song texts, and reflections on the meaning of communal worship, this study will help any local congregation celebrate the larger body of Christ with whom they are joined every time they gather together. Each session includes an exploration of a section of “Worshiping the Triune God” and questions for reflection. Use this study with your worship team, church staff or council, or small group.

Emily R. Brink is a senior research fellow at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship; for twenty years she served as founding editor of *Reformed Worship* and worship and music editor for the Christian Reformed Church.

Paul Detterman, a teaching elder (pastor) and church musician in the PC(USA), is executive director of Presbyterians for Renewal and The Fellowship of Presbyterians. He is a former associate for worship and editor of worship resources for the PC(USA).