

THE

RIGHT

WORSHIP

QUESTION

by T. SCOTT DANIELS

Next year will be my thirtieth year of teaching in university or seminary settings,

which means I will also begin my thirtieth year of reading student evaluations. No professor loves being evaluated. Some course evaluations are helpful. Others, not so much. Perhaps my favorite student evaluation across the years was a brief one that read, "This course is too difficult for the non-text-reading student." I will often share that student's comment at the beginning of a new semester, but my students rarely get the joke. No one laughs. However, anytime I share that evaluation with faculty colleagues, they immediately burst into laughter. Only an undergraduate student could consider a non-text-reading student to exist.

After a few years of reading unhelpful student evaluations, I began asking my students for a favor. For several years now, I have encouraged them to not evaluate the class with this question in mind: "Did I like this course?" Don't get me wrong, like every professor, I want students to enjoy the learning experience. I hope they will encourage their friends to take my theology class next semester. However, as I planned lectures, created assignments, and chose textbooks, I really wasn't wondering if the students would like to do all these things. I'm certain if I didn't assign these materials and grade students on their work, they would not do, read, or sit through these things out of their own volition. So I tell them the

questions they should be asking when they fill out their evaluation: "Did this course do to me what it should have done to me? Was I shaped through this course in the ways I should have been shaped?" An evaluation based on those questions is significantly more helpful for me as a professor than simply asking whether they liked something or not.

I bring up this story about students in an article about worship because I've begun asking similar questions to people attending church membership classes. I will say to new attendees, "Please don't join this church simply because you like it. I assume, at some level, worshipping at this church is resonating with you or you would not be exploring membership. However, the question I would prefer you ask is this: 'Is my participation in the worship of this church doing to me the things it ought to do to me? If I give myself for the next several months or years to the practices of this worshiping community, will I be put through practices that will help to form in me the Christlike character God longs for me to have?'"

As this issue reflects on worship, I am convinced that those are the kinds of questions we should be asking. The key question related to worship is: "how is worship forming us?"

In thinking deeply about that question, we should also reflect on several aspects of the nature of worship. First, worship is more than what we sing. Almost everything we do when we gather has some aspect of worship to it. Unfortunately, in many current church settings, the word worship has become synonymous with singing. Obviously, singing is an important aspect of worship. Poetic words about God set to music often become the theology of our imagination, the theology set deep in our bones. Any conversation about worship should include the music of the church. However, when we gather for worship, there are many aspects of those sacred moments that form us. We are called to worship. We pass the peace of Christ to one another. We confess our sins together. We receive together the assurance of God's grace. We offer our prayers and petitions to the Lord. We come prepared to give out of the abundance of what God has given to us. We are shaped by the hearing and proclaiming of the

for scholars and pastors to lament the impact of consumerism, materialism, nationalism, and divisive politicization upon the church. These are indeed problems. However, we did not come to embody these problems accidentally. It took hours and hours of watching commercials, shopping online, participation in nation-inscribing rituals, watching cable news, listening to angry talk radio, and being formed by social media echo-chambers to get this way.

When we discover that worship is an all-encompassing word that describes the many practices that form our lives and direct the commitment of our hearts, we will then have to begin to pay attention to all the ways the things we do are teaching us what to love.

I can't help but think here about the biblical book of Daniel. The book beautifully and creatively narrates the challenges of life for Daniel and his friends while

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Word. We celebrate the arrival of the new creation in people's lives as they enter the waters of baptism. We are nourished and edified by the means of grace available in the Lord's Supper. And we are blessed and sent back into our homes and neighborhoods as the body of Christ for the sake of the world. This is just a partial list of the practices that regularly shape our lives together.

Second, most worship happens outside of the sanctuary and our set times for communal worship. Every day, we participate in various practices and rituals that form our imaginations, influence our allegiances, and teach us what to love. The philosopher James K. A. Smith calls these various rituals and practices *cultural liturgies*. The apostle Paul describes them as the multiplicity of ways that the world is trying to "squeeze you into its mold" (Romans 12:1). In recent days, it is common

they live in exile in Babylon. The primary problem for Daniel and his friends was not that Babylon was oppressive (although like every empire, it could at times be that). The main challenge for Daniel in exile was that Babylon was alluring. When you live in Babylon, your primary concern is not that your children will be killed by the empire; it is that they will cease to be the unique people of God living in Babylon, and they will instead simply become Babylonian. If Daniel and his friends eat at the king's table for too long, they will begin to believe Nebuchadnezzar, and not God, is the source of their provision. If they pledge allegiance to the king's image each day, they may soon come to imagine themselves as primarily citizens of Babylon. If they lose their sacred, daily, and ordinary practices, they will likely lose the unique way they see, interpret, and live within a complicated world. Proper worship teaches us how to interpret the world rightly.

WORSHIP MATTERS. AT SOME LEVEL, WE ARE ALWAYS — — — — — WORSHIPPING.

And finally, because the world is trying to squeeze us into its mold, our worship should be intentional and counter-formational. If we are involved in the sacred responsibility of prayerfully planning worship for the body of Christ, we should carefully reflect on how the various practices of worship are forming (or counter-forming) us. The content of our worship certainly matters. However, the forms are not neutral; the form of our worship matters also.

If I could give an example, I believe the language we use pertaining to worship is also one of the forms or aspects that matters. In most of our settings for worship, there is an elevated space in the front. In worship, the language we give to this elevated space is the *platform* and not the *stage*. Stages are spaces where actors perform and artists entertain. I have no problem with stages. I love attending the theater and concerts. But those who lead God's people in worship are neither actors nor performers; they are worship leaders. They do not entertain from a stage, but they lead God's people into worship from the platform.

The room in which the people of God gather is not an *auditorium*, it is a *sanctuary*. Again, I have nothing against auditoriums or arenas. They serve important communal purposes. Even so, the people of God gather in a space made sacred by the unique presence of Christ in our midst. We enter the sanctuary, like the revelator entered the throne room in the fourth and fifth chapters of Revelation, to be reminded that the One seated on the throne is at the center of all things and is worthy of our praise.

Also, the people who are gathered are not the *audience*. I can understand how we get that confused. If we think of the room as an auditorium and the front as a stage, then when the lights go down and the production begins, it is natural for people to believe that they are the audience. They

are not. They are the *congregation*. If there is an audience in a worship service, the audience is God. Again, the question both those in the congregation and those planning worship should ask is not, "Will the people like it?" (They are not an audience we are trying to entertain). Rather, the questions we should ask are, "Will God be glorified?" and "Will the practices we participate in counter-form us into reflections of the One we have come to honor and receive from?"

Worship matters. At some level, we are always worshipping. Therefore, we should give ourselves daily and weekly to those practices that best shape us into the image of Christ. The question is not, "Do you like it?" The question is, "Are the ways you worship forming you to be the disciple you've been called to be?"

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