

A Critique of Tim Keller's "Evangelistic Worship"¹

Lee Irons, Ph.D.
Revised May 2012²

One of the most significant aspects of the missional movement is the shift from the traditional view that the church's corporate worship is the meeting of the triune God with his covenant people³ to the view that worship should be inclusive of and addressed to both members of the covenant community and those who are not members of the covenant community. For example, Tim Keller writes that being "missional" means "adapting and reformulating everything [the church does] in worship, discipleship, community, and service – so as to be engaged with the non-Christian society around it."⁴ In a video clip he says that "almost everyone in the missional church movement, no matter how you define that, believes that worship ought to be inclusive of Christians and non-Christians."⁵ In order to be missional, the church "should constantly anticipate and address the concerns, objections, and reservations of skeptics"⁶ and that

¹ The views presented in this paper are my own and do not necessarily represent those of the session of New Life Burbank (PCA), where I serve as a ruling elder.

² Since publishing this paper on my website on February 29, 2012, I have revised it in light of feedback from the session of New Life Burbank and other individuals. Most of the revisions pertain to clarifying two terms that I used too frequently in the earlier version of this paper but that I now realize were ambiguous: "address" and "unbelievers." By "address" I mean to engage apologetically with the aim of seeking to convert. By "unbelievers" I mean those not professing faith in Christ as members of the covenant community. See footnotes 10, 16, 21, 24, 25, 31, 43. I have also added an Appendix answering questions prompted by my paper. I appreciate the feedback and questions, from people on both sides of this debate, which have prodded me to clarify my thinking and be more precise in my language.

³ "A service of public worship is ... before all else, a meeting of the triune God with His chosen people" (PCA BCO 47-2). The same statement is also found in the OPC Directory for Worship II.2.

⁴ Keller, "The Missional Church" (June 2001), p. 1. <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/missional.pdf>. Accessed February 6, 2012.

⁵ Keller, "Missional vs. Seeker Churches" (video). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvFbzpAwHdw>. Accessed July 10, 2011.

⁶ Keller, "Redeemer Vision Paper #5: The Fullness of Ministry," p. 1. http://www.redeemer2.com/visioncampaign/papers/Vision_Paper_5-Ministry_Balance.pdf. Accessed February 6, 2012.

this attitude "permeates everything, every meeting."⁷ In his 2001 paper, "Evangelistic Worship,"

Keller encourages pastors to address unbelievers directly in worship:

c) Directly address and welcome them. Talk regularly to "those of you who aren't sure you believe this, or who aren't sure just what you believe." Give them many asides, even expressing the language of their hearts. Articulate their objections to Christian living and belief better than they can do it themselves. Express sincere sympathy for their difficulties, even when challenging them severely for their selfishness and unbelief. Admonish with tears (literally or figuratively.) Always grant whatever degree of merit their objections have. It is extremely important that the unbeliever feel you understand them.⁸

My purpose in this paper is to critique the view that the church's corporate worship is for both the edification of believers and the evangelism of unbelievers. At first, this idea may seem harmless and even admirable. After all, should we not want unbelievers to be present at our worship services, and should we not eagerly desire to see them converted? Paul himself envisions this possibility when he speaks of the unbeliever in the assembly being convicted of his sin by the ministry of the Word and so "falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (1 Cor 14:24-25).⁹ What pastor, elder or ordinary Christian would not be delighted if this happened in their worship services? Who would object to it? We long to see more people converted, baptized, and becoming members of our churches.

Yet it is one thing for unbelievers to be present at our worship services geared to the edification of believers within the context of a covenant dialogue between God and his covenant people. It is another thing to engage unbelieving aliens to the covenant,¹⁰ altering the worship service itself to make it "missional." It is one thing if God sovereignly uses covenantal worship

⁷ Keller, "Characteristics of a Missional Church" (video). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFFISb-Zsc8>. Accessed July 2, 2011.

⁸ Keller, "Evangelistic Worship" (June 2001), pp. 7-8. <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/evangelisticworship.pdf>. Accessed February 6, 2012.

⁹ All Scripture quotes are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ Originally this clause read "... to engage and address unbelievers and aliens to the covenant directly."

to convert unbelievers and bring them into the covenant. It is another thing to "adapt and reformulate" everything we do in the service in order to connect with the questions and concerns of unbelievers and to attempt to bring them to faith.

Before I critique the concept of evangelistic worship, I do not want to be misunderstood in what I say below. So let me make clear what I am not arguing.

First, I am not arguing that it is wrong to invite our unbelieving friends and family to our church's corporate worship. The church is not a secret society. Everything we do is public and anyone may come and witness what we as Christians do in church. Indeed, Paul acknowledges that "unbelievers or outsiders" may "enter" (1 Cor 14:23-24) the assembly of the church gathered for worship. So my argument is not that unbelievers should be excluded from worship.

Second, I am not arguing that we should not take the possible presence of unbelievers into consideration in the way corporate worship is conducted. Paul explicitly argues for the need for tongues to be interpreted by raising the possibility that unbelievers or outsiders with little or no knowledge of Christianity may be present. He does not want such outsiders to think that we are "out of [our] minds" (1 Cor 14:23). He wants our worship to be a good testimony to a watching world so that the gospel of God will not be blasphemed, slandered, or misunderstood.

Third, I am not suggesting that the worship service cannot be a means by which the Spirit may convict unbelieving visitors and bring them to faith in Christ. Paul clearly says that it can be. Rather, my argument is that we should not deliberately "engage" unbelievers in worship. In other words, worship is covenantal and by its very nature it does not directly address unbelievers evangelistically and seek to win them to faith. My argument is that to make worship less covenantal/exclusive and more evangelistic/outfacing is not only contrary to Scriptural teaching

on worship but that, paradoxically, to do so in fact makes worship less effective as a means by which the Spirit may bring unbelievers to faith in Christ.

Fourth, I am not arguing that evangelistic meetings where unbelievers are directly addressed, engaged, and reasoned with are unbiblical. My argument in its simplest form is that Lord's Day worship is not an evangelistic meeting. The apostles preached the gospel to unbelievers and conducted Bible studies with evangelistic intent in a variety of venues: in private homes, in the temple precincts, in Jewish synagogues, in market places, and in other public areas like the Areopagus of Athens.¹¹ But there is no record of them ever doing so in the church. The weekly assembly of the church has a purpose distinct from evangelism, namely, the worship of the triune God and the building up of the body of Christ. We can and should hold other meetings for the purpose of evangelism and apologetic dialogue with unbelievers.

Covenantal Worship

In order to set the context for my critique of evangelistic worship, I think it would be helpful to briefly define what I mean by the alternative that I am calling "covenantal worship." My argument is that the essence of worship is established in the book of Exodus, at the assembly (*qāhāl/ekklēsia*)¹² of Israel encamped at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Exod 19). The fact that Israel-at-Sinai is the trans-epochal¹³ paradigm for worship is established by the New Testament passages (especially Heb 12:18-29) which refer back to Israel-at-Sinai as fulfilled in New Covenant

¹¹ Acts 3:11; 5:20; 10:27; 11:12; 13:5, 14, 42-44; 16:13; 17:17, 22; 18:7-11; 28:23, 30-31.

¹² The Septuagint uses the Greek words *ekklēsia* and *synagōgē* as stereotyped renderings of the Hebrew word *qāhāl*. Lust-Eynikel-Hauspie, *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*. Note also the statement: "This is the one [sc. Moses] who was in the congregation (*ekklēsia*) in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai" (Acts 7:38). The word *ekklēsia* in the LXX almost always translates *qāhāl*. K. L. Schmidt, "ἐκκλησία," *TDNT* 3.527.

¹³ That is, a paradigm that holds across redemptive history from the Old Covenant into the New Covenant, while also recognizing that there are differences between worship in the two covenants.

worship, not to mention the use of the Greek word *ekklēsia* in reference to the assembled church (1 Cor 11:18; 14:19, 28, 34-35).¹⁴

So what is the essence of worship according to the book of Exodus?

(1) The prerequisite of worship: the people of God have been created by redemption (the Passover and the exodus) and constituted as God's special holy people, in covenant with God, and distinct from the world (Exodus 12–15).

(2) The call to worship: this liturgical call gathers the whole covenant *qāhāl/ekklēsia* before God. It is not just the people in general as members of the covenant throughout space and time, but the people of God constituted as such in covenantal assembly before God. First God calls the people to worship (Exod 19:1-7); then they prepare themselves for worship by washing their garments and abstaining from sexual relations (vv 10-15).

(3) The service of worship: worship itself is not the gathering of the people for just any occasion but their coming together as God's people to meet with God to serve him as his kingdom of priests. In worship there is a covenantal dialogue and communion between God and his people. We see this dialogical element throughout the Israel-at-Sinai narrative (Exod 19–24). God calls his people to worship, and the people respond together, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Exod 19:8), and then Moses reports their response to God (v 9). Later, after the giving of the law, the people answered in union, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do ... and we will be obedient" (Exod 24:3, 7). This is followed by the covenant ratification ceremony involving the sprinkling of blood and Moses declaring, "This is the blood of the covenant" (v 8; cp. Heb 9:19-21; 10:22; 12:24). The covenant having been ratified, the people experience the highest point of the covenant, namely, communion with God, as the elders of

¹⁴ The church is called "a kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6) several times in the NT: 1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:10.

Israel ascend the mountain to behold God's glory where they "ate and drank" (vv 9-11). The dialogical and covenantal nature of worship is clear.¹⁵

If covenantal worship is the biblical paradigm for worship, then there are significant implications for how we deal with the possible presence of unbelievers. Contrary to the "evangelistic worship" model, which says that we must address unbelievers throughout the worship service, "covenantal worship" dictates that, since unbelievers are not part of the redeemed people of God and are not in covenant with God, they cannot participate in the covenantal dialogue that is the essence of the communion that occurs between God and his people in worship. Non-covenant members are neither addressed by God in the course of the covenantal dialogue of worship,¹⁶ nor do they have any standing in the covenant to be able to say anything to God. If so, then the worship leader, when representing either God or the people, has no authority either to address non-covenant members on behalf of God, or to give non-covenant members a voice when addressing God.

1 Corinthians 14

The key passage relevant to this question is 1 Corinthians 14, a passage that Keller uses to support his view, especially vv 23-25 which speak of an outsider falling on his face and acknowledging that God is in the midst of his gathered people. But I think Keller takes these

¹⁵ For more on the dialogical principle of worship, see Hart and Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 95-102. They quote the OPC's Directory for Worship: "As a service of public worship is in its essence a meeting of God and his people, the parts of the service are of two kinds: those which are performed on behalf of God, and those which are performed by the congregation. In the former the worshippers are receptive, in the latter they are active. It is reasonable that these two elements be made to alternate as far as possible" (OPC Directory for Worship III.1).

¹⁶ Originally this clause read "Unbelievers are neither addressed by God" I am dealing here with the liturgy, not the sermon, and am not at this point addressing the question whether the preacher may, in worship, invite those who are not professing Christians to come to faith in Christ. I think the preaching that takes place in the worship of the covenant community ought to aim primarily to edify the covenant community, but I am not opposed to the limited and occasional use of gospel invitations to outsiders as long as it does not overwhelm.

verses out of context and misses the way in which Paul provides a different emphasis than the one Keller claims.

It is important to note that in this chapter Paul is describing the worship of the assembly. It is a meeting in which the church is constituted as the church, rather than some other type of meeting at which believers or others may happen to be present. This is made clear by Paul's use of the phrase, "when the whole church comes together" (v 23). This language of "coming together" links back to chapter 11, where Paul was focused on the coming together of the church to celebrate the Lord's Supper:

"When you **come together**, it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you **come together as a church**, I hear that there are divisions among you ... When you **come together**, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat ... So then, my brothers, when you **come together** to eat, wait for one another ... so that when you **come together** it will not be for judgment" (1 Cor 11:17-18, 20, 33-34).

Paul's language of "coming together as a church" probably originated from Jesus himself:

"If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are **gathered in my name**, there I am among them" (Matt 18:19-20).

Worship is not a meeting of some believers and some unbelievers to talk about religious subjects with the hope of converting the unbelievers. It is the gathering of the disciples of Jesus, coming together "in his name" and with the expectation of his special presence among them. So when the language of "coming together" is used in 1 Cor 14 (vv 23 and 26), it is clear that the service he is describing is a coming together of the body of Christ "as a church" (1 Cor 11:18), not a gathering of believers and unbelievers, or even some other informal gathering of believers. It is interesting that Paul can use the term "church" not only to refer to the abstract concept of the church as all Christians in general, but to a particular church when assembled for worship:

"For, in the first place, when you come together **as a church**, I hear that there are divisions among you" (1 Cor 11:18).

"Nevertheless, **in church** I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Cor 14:19).

"But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent **in church** and speak to himself and to God" (1 Cor 14:28).

"As in all the churches of the saints,³⁴ the women should keep silent **in the churches**. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.³⁵ If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak **in church**" (1 Cor 14:34-35).

Those with the gift of tongues are not commanded to keep silent at all times when there is no interpreter, but only "in church." Women are not commanded to keep silent at all times, but only "in church." In each of these verses, the phrase "in church" refers to meetings "when [we] gather together as God's people, when the body of Christ is actualized."¹⁷

And what is the purpose of this gathering together, this actualization of the body of Christ in corporate worship? Throughout the passage, Paul says that everything must be done for the edification of believers: "for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (v 3), "so that the church may be built up" (v 5), "strive to excel in building up the church" (v 12), "so that all may learn and all be encouraged" (v 31). Note especially the command to "let *all things* be done for building up" (v 26), which seems to contradict Keller's view that "everything" the church does should be geared toward being evangelistic or missional. Paul, by contrast, says that "everything" should be done for building up the body of Christ. It is worthwhile to read the entire passage and to see how frequently Paul emphasizes edification as the purpose of what takes place in the meetings of the gathered church:

¹⁷ Kevin Giles, *What On Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 118 (quoting H. Merklein).

"Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.² For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.³ On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their **upbuilding** and **encouragement** and **consolation**.⁴ The one who speaks in a tongue **builds up** himself, but the one who prophesies **builds up the church**.⁵ Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that **the church may be built up**.

"⁶Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I **benefit** you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or **teaching**?⁷ If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?⁸ And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will **get ready for battle**?⁹ So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air.¹⁰ There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning,¹¹ but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.¹² So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, **strive to excel in building up the church**.

"¹³Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret.¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.¹⁵ What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.¹⁶ Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?¹⁷ For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is **not being built up**.¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.¹⁹ Nevertheless, **in church** I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to **instruct** others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

"²⁰Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.²¹ In the Law it is written, 'By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.'²² Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but **for believers**.²³ If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all,²⁵ the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

"²⁶What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. **Let all things be done for building up**.²⁷ If any

...speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. ²⁸But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. ²⁹Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. ³¹For you can all prophesy one by one, **so that all may learn and all be encouraged,** ³²and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. ³³For God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Cor 14:1-33).

The debate centers on vv 23-25 where Paul mentions the possibility that an unbeliever or an outsider might "enter" the worship service. But the mere possibility that unbelievers may be present is not the controversial point, for as I said at the beginning, I acknowledge that unbelievers may be present at our worship services and that God may use what they hear in worship to convert them. Keller's argument is deeper. He writes: "It cannot be missed that Paul directly tells a local congregation to *adapt its worship because of the presence of unbelievers.*"¹⁸ Keller takes this principle of "adapting" worship because of the presence of unbelievers and runs with it: He says the preacher "should constantly anticipate and address the concerns, objections, and reservations of skeptics,"¹⁹ should "directly address and welcome" unbelievers, talk regularly to "those of you who aren't sure you believe this," "give them many asides," "articulating their objections," "expressing sincere sympathy for their difficulties," "admonishing [them] with tears," "always granting whatever degree of merit their objections have," all with the goal of making "the unbeliever feel you understand them." "We must remember what it is like to *not believe.*"²⁰ Does all of this follow from Paul's argument that tongues should be interpreted so that unbelievers won't think we are lunatics? It seems quite a leap. Paul was concerned that the Corinthian emphasis on supernatural charismatic gifts was a bad testimony before a watching world. He did not want the church's gospel message to be obscured or misunderstood, as if the

¹⁸ Keller, "Evangelistic Worship," p. 6. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Keller, "Redeemer Vision Paper #5: The Fullness of Ministry," p. 1.

²⁰ Keller, "Evangelistic Worship," pp. 7-8.

church were nothing more than a club of raving fanatics. But Paul's narrow concern provides no basis for Keller's claim that the pastor should engage the unbaptized²¹ and answer their objections to Christianity. Keller has wrested 1 Cor 14:23-25 out of context in order to support an unbiblical "reformulation" of worship from the historic covenantal understanding to the new missional view.

In fact, the context of 1 Corinthians 14 – with its emphasis on the edification of believers – suggests that Paul would disavow the conclusion that Keller wishes to draw from this text. For Paul, unbelievers or outsiders are not part of the "coming together as a church." They are "entering" an assembly of the body of Christ, not as participants, but as spectators. And further, it is clear that they are not participating in the activities for which the church came together. They are not present in order to worship God, or to receive instruction for believers, or to be edified and built up by the ministry of the prophets, or to partake of the Lord's Supper. They are clearly not the intended audience of anything that is taking place. They are visitors at a meeting that is not for them or addressed to them. Nevertheless, in this scenario, Paul recognizes that the Spirit can use the church's prophetic ministry, even though it is not addressed to unbelievers ("prophecy is for believers," v 22), to convict them of their sin and cause them to fall down on their face to worship God. This is a side-effect of the church's worship, not its intent. Tellingly, the words Paul puts in the mouth of the hypothetical visitor, "God is really among you," set up the very "we-them" distinction that Keller dislikes.²² Unbelieving visitors should know that they are not members of the body of Christ but spectators and outsiders looking in.

What a contrast 1 Cor 14 is to Keller's claim that the Lord's Day worship service ought to be evangelistic. Paul repeatedly commands that everything in the worship service be done for

²¹ Originally this clause read "... that the pastor should directly address unbelievers"

²² "The missional church avoids 'we-them' language." Keller, "The Missional Church," p. 2.

the edification of believers. Nowhere does Paul (or any other New Testament author) say that everything in the worship service must be adapted to evangelize unbelievers.

Liturgical Light from the Epistles

1 Corinthians 14 is not the only passage relevant to the question of the intended audience of the worship liturgy. The liturgical structure and contents of the New Testament epistles make this clear as well. All of the epistles are a rich source of knowledge concerning the nature of the early church's corporate worship.²³ We know that the epistles were read in public worship (see Col 4:16). The epistles were in fact written as substitutes for the apostles' personal presence (see 2 Cor 9:10-11; 13:2, 10). Therefore, the epistles give us a glimpse both of some of the liturgical elements of the early church's worship and of the character of the preaching that occurred in the context of the church's worship. There are four distinct elements of the epistles that shed light on the question of the intended audience of the liturgy: the salutations, the exhortations, the greetings, and the benedictions.

First, the opening salutations of the epistles. None of the authors of the New Testament epistles address their epistles to the believers and unbelievers at Corinth or Rome or Philippi. Without exception, the epistles are addressed only to those who are "saints," "elect," "loved by God," or "the church of God." Here are some examples:

"To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:7).

²³ "Paul's letters are richly endowed with liturgical elements. Since these letters were read in public worship, the frequent inclusion of liturgical elements is to be expected." J. L. Wu, "Liturgical Elements," in *The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 557-60; cp. Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 34.

"To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Cor 1:2).

"To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:1-2).

"To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion ..." (1 Pet 1:1).

"To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: may grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord" (2 Pet 1:1-2).

Again, we know that the epistles were read in worship and that as a result many of the liturgical elements of the service entered into the epistles. From this we may conclude that the worship service itself began with a salutation similar to that found in the epistles. Since the epistolary salutations are only addressed to believers, it is likely that the liturgical ones were as well. We have no biblical basis for including unbelievers in our opening liturgical salutations in worship. The presider, speaking on behalf of God, greets the people of God and calls them to enter into his courts to worship as God's redeemed and chosen people. Of course, we want to be welcoming and hospitable to visitors, some of whom may not be members of the covenant community, but unbelievers are to be greeted and welcomed from the pulpit only in that limited capacity, as visitors, not in the sense of addressing the divine salutation to God's covenant people or the call to worship to them.²⁴

Second, the exhortations found in the body of the epistles. The instructions and exhortations found throughout the epistles are all targeted to believers and only to believers. Paul and the writers of other epistles may exhort Christians to behave a certain way in relation to outsiders, but they never directly address outsiders who are not baptized members of the

²⁴ Originally this sentence read: "Any outsiders who may be present are not to be explicitly greeted or welcomed from the pulpit." I have revised this above to clarify that I am not opposed to greeting and welcoming visitors.

covenant community.²⁵ The epistles are filled with exhortations appealing to professing believers on the basis of their union with Christ to live lives that are in keeping with their new identity in Christ, empowered by the Spirit, and to the glory of God. The writers of the New Testament epistles do not do what Keller says a preacher should do – “directly address and welcome” unbelievers, “give them many asides” and “constantly anticipate and address the concerns, objections, and reservations of skeptics.”

Third, the command to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Pet 5:14). The holy kiss is particularly significant, since it takes a form of greeting that was used in the ancient world primarily for relatives and applies it to all who are “brothers and sisters in Christ,” implying that the church is the new family of God based not on biological kinship but on a shared spiritual relationship with Christ.²⁶ This command necessarily excludes the unbaptized since they are not part of the family of God. The literal kiss of peace²⁷ of the ancient church eventually died out, but it continues today in many churches in updated form as the passing of the peace. It is an opportunity for us to express our love toward one another and our unity as the family of God before taking communion, an idea suggested by Jesus’ command to leave one’s gift at the altar and be reconciled before making the offering (Matt 5:23-24).²⁸ In any case, such greetings are obviously covenantally exclusive, for the

²⁵ Originally this sentence read: “... they never directly address unbelievers.” I now see that this sentence is not true as it stands, since the NT writers do sometimes address members of the covenant community who have not come to Christ or who are in danger of falling away from Christ (see, e.g., parts of 2 Corinthians and Hebrews).

²⁶ This is referred to as “fictive kinship.” David M. Bossman, “Paul’s Fictive Kinship Movement,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26.4 (Nov 1996): 163-171; Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (3rd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 214-15.

²⁷ Justin Martyr mentions the kiss in his description of the Lord’s Day liturgy, placing it right after the prayers and just before the Eucharist: “Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss. There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine.” Justin, *Apology* 1.65 (ANF 1.185). Tertullian is the first to call it “a kiss of peace” (*osculum pacis*). Tertullian, *De Oratione* 18.

²⁸ F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 932.

greetings are to be given "in the Lord" (1 Cor 16:19). Also, the adjective "holy" ("holy kiss") indicates that it is to be exchanged only among the saints, the holy people of God.²⁹

Fourth, the benedictions, which are typically found in the concluding section of the epistles. Here are some examples:

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13:14).

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers" (Gal 6:18; cp. Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 16:23; Phil 4:23; Col 4:18; 1 Thess 5:28; 2 Thess 3:18; Phm 25; Heb 13:25).

"Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible" (Eph 6:23-24).

"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Heb 13:20-21).

"And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen ... Peace to all of you who are in Christ" (1 Pet 5:10-11, 14).

This is the language of the covenant community: "The grace of *our* Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, *brothers*," and "Peace to all of you *who are in Christ*." There is no aside to unbelievers for fear that they may feel excluded. These apostolic benedictions are blessings pronounced only on the church, the body of Christ, members of the covenant community. They are essentially prayers in which the apostle, through the power of the Spirit, pronounces God's "grace" and "peace" upon his people in language that echoes the Aaronic benediction.³⁰

²⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 836.

³⁰ Both divine "grace" and "peace" were pronounced in the Aaronic benediction: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be *gracious* to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you *peace*" (Numbers 6:24-26).

The epistles shed important light on the character of the early church's worship. As I have shown, the church's liturgy in the apostolic age was thoroughly covenantal and characterized by "in-house" language, from the opening salutation to the concluding benediction. It follows then, that while outsiders may be present as visitors on occasion, there is no scriptural warrant for the pastor or worship leader to "constantly" engage the questions of those who do not profess faith in Christ,³¹ or to adapt the liturgy because of their presence.

Liturgical Light from Biblical Theology

The same point is made when we examine a theme of biblical theology that can be traced from the Old Testament into New Testament, namely, the motif that God creates for himself a covenant people by means of redemption, and he does this in order that his covenant people might worship him. The aim of redemption is worship. We see this very clearly in the book of Exodus as God is preparing to deliver his people from bondage in Egypt. The LORD first appeared to Moses at the burning bush and commissioned him for his special role as the human deliverer of God's people. What I want to highlight is God's statement to Moses that after he has brought the people out of Egypt, they will serve or worship God at Mount Sinai.

"But I will be with you [Moses], and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, **you shall serve God** on this mountain" (Exod 3:12).

The gathering of Israel after the exodus to worship of God at Mount Sinai is not only a sign that God has sent Moses, it is also the reason for the exodus itself:

³¹ Originally, this part of the sentence read "... there is no scriptural warrant for the pastor or worship leader to explicitly address them." This sounds too restrictive. I do not want to be interpreted as claiming that visitors cannot be welcomed, or that unbelievers cannot be invited to come to Christ.

"The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me [Moses] to you [Pharaoh], saying, 'Let my people go, **that they may serve me** in the wilderness'" (Exod 7:16).³²

The verb translated "serve" is *'abad* in Hebrew. This verb has a wide range of meanings, including "to toil," "to till the ground," "to work," and "to serve a king/master as a subject/slave." But in many contexts in the Old Testament it has a narrower, religious meaning – to worship and honor God or pagan gods. In some passages it means specifically to worship God by offering sacrifices (e.g., Exod 3:12; Isa 19:21).³³ Over 100 times in the Hebrew Old Testament, this verb is used in a religious or cultic sense, usually with the meaning "to worship God," and the verses quoted above from Exodus are prime examples.³⁴

When the LORD says that he is going to bring his people out of bondage in Egypt so that they may "serve" him, he means that his act of redemption is for the purpose of creating a covenant people who will be his worshippers. The exodus, the greatest typological act of redemption in the Old Testament, was accomplished with the aim of creating a called, chosen, redeemed, covenant people who will worship the true God. The people of God are redeemed out of the house of bondage; thus freed, they are called out of the world to engage in the cultic service of God. When the chosen people finally come to the mountain ("you shall serve God on this mountain") in Exodus 19, God reminds the people that he has delivered them from bondage and brought them to himself and for himself:

"On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²They set out from Rephidim and

³² These or similar words are repeated at Exod 4:23; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3.

³³ Koehler-Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*; Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*.

³⁴ In the LXX, whenever the Hebrew verb *'abad* is used in a religious or cultic sense, it is almost always rendered *latreuō* in Greek, whereas when it is used in non-religious senses, a different Greek verb is used to render it. H. Strathmann, "λατρεύω, λατρεία," *TDNT* 4.60. As a result of the influence of the LXX, all 21 occurrence of *latreuō* in the New Testament are religious or cultic, as are all 5 occurrences of the cognate noun *latreia*. See BDAG λατρεύω.

came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain,³ while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ⁴You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and ***how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*** ⁵Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and ***keep my covenant,*** you shall be ***my treasured possession among all peoples,*** for all the earth is mine; ⁶and ***you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*** These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel'" (Exod 19:1-6).

The people are encamped before the mountain to worship their Redeemer. There assembled as "the congregation in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38), they receive the covenant as represented by the ten commandments engraved on tablets of stone. By means of God's act of redemption out of bondage in Egypt they have been set apart unto God as his "treasured possession among all peoples." They are distinct from the world. They are God's holy, covenant people, bought with a price and separate from the world. As such they are "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" called to "serve" the true and living God in the religious and cultic sense.

The rest of Exodus 19 is filled with the concept of covenantal consecration and holiness. God commands Moses to instruct the people to prepare themselves for two days before the coming of God in the fire, thunder, and cloud on the third day. They are to consecrate themselves by washing their garments (v 10) and not going near a woman (v 15). God tells Moses to set limits for the people around the foot of the mountain, warning that any man or beast that touches the mountain must be put to death. Only those who have been cleansed from sin and set apart may gather at the foot of the mountain to worship the holy, living God. This preparation and consecration sets the stage for a very important verse which defines worship as meeting with God:

"Then Moses brought the people out of the camp ***to meet God,*** and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain" (Exod 19:17).

Understanding worship as "meeting with God" explains why the people must first be redeemed and then consecrated – they are meeting with the holy God. No one can meet God unless they have had their sins forgiven and are reckoned as belonging to his holy people. This is why we have a call to worship, for no one can enter God's holy presence unless God calls them to come. And this is why worship always includes a confession of sin and assurance of pardon near the beginning of the service, for as sinners we must stop by the laver to get our sins washed away before we can enter into the holy of holies through the blood of Christ. Exodus 19:17 supports the definition of worship in the Presbyterian Directory for Worship: "A service of public worship is ... before all else, a meeting of the triune God with His chosen people" (PCA BCO 47-2; OPC Directory for Worship II.2).

All of this is picked up by the author of Hebrews in reference to the cultic activities of the New Covenant people of God. The author of Hebrews highlights the discontinuities between the meeting of God's people at Sinai and the spiritual nature of our meeting with God in the New Covenant, discontinuities that relate to the transition from the Old Covenant to the New.

Nevertheless, the covenantal structure of worship remains the same in both:

"For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.'²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.'²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel ...²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:18-24, 28-29).

There are major differences between the worship of the Old Covenant people of God and the worship of the New Covenant church. The one is characterized by a sense of distance from a holy God, the other by a sense of nearness. The one, by a sense of fear of judgment; the other, by a sense of confident assurance, yet one combined with reverence. The one involves coming to a mountain that may be touched; the other, to a heavenly mountain. Yet in spite of the differences between the two covenants, the biblical-theological pattern is the same: redemption first, then worship. The aim of redemption is the creation of a covenant people belonging to God who are set apart from the world in order to offer acceptable worship unto God. Unbelievers may be in the same room while the covenant people of God are worshipping, but by definition they cannot "come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem ... to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant." These are unseen spiritual realities that only the regenerate can "see" by faith. Worship is a covenantal meeting between God and his covenant people.

Therefore, it puts the cart before the horse to argue that worship ought to be a means of evangelism. Worship is not a means of evangelism but the end of evangelism.³⁵ Those who have not yet been joined to the redeemed people of God cannot participate in this holy activity of worship in any other way than as bystanders and observers. Nor is the worship service "for" them in any proper sense, other than in the sense that, as Paul says in 1 Cor 14:23-25, the Spirit may use the service to convict them of their sin. They may be present as guests during public worship, but they are "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise" (Eph 2:12). When the call to worship is given by the presider, it is the chosen people of God who are addressed: "Oh come, let us worship and bow

³⁵ Even the Gospel Coalition says, "We want to be radically distinct from the culture around us ... We therefore do not see our corporate worship services as the primary connecting point with those outside." "Theological Vision for Ministry," pp. 3-4. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/vision>. Accessed October 13, 2011.

down ... *for he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture*" (Ps 95:6-7). Worship is the meeting of God's covenant people with God. It is an act of religious and cultic "service" offered by the redeemed and through which the faith of the redeemed is exercised and strengthened to the exclusion of all who lack such faith.

Jargon and "Tribal" Language

One of the consequences of adopting the missional view of worship is that, in order to make it effective as a tool for communicating the gospel to unbelievers, the very language of worship must be adapted to an unbelieving audience. Keller argues that we must be careful to avoid jargon and what he derisively calls "tribal" language. Keller says: "The missional church avoids 'tribal' language, stylized prayer language, unnecessary evangelical pious 'jargon,' and archaic language that seeks to set a 'spiritual tone.'" Missional churches "speak in language that is not filled with pious tribal or technical terms."³⁶ Such language is confusing, bewildering, and off-putting to unbelievers, so if we want to be effective missionaries to our culture, we must avoid such jargon and tribal terms and seek to engage unbelievers on their terms. But to the degree that this is done, to that degree the service loses its covenantal character as a meeting between God and his people.

Of course, it is important to communicate effectively. It is bad liturgical and homiletical practice to use technical terms understandable only to those who have studied theology or attended seminary. If some biblical terms or concepts are difficult, the preacher should take the time to explain them. But Keller is pushing for more than effective communication, for he advocates "adapting and reformulating everything [the church does] in worship, discipleship,

³⁶ Keller, "The Missional Church," pp. 2-3.

community, and service – so as to be engaged with the non-Christian society around it.”³⁷ He wants the church to use language that engages modern culture and to avoid language that would set the church apart as a “tribe” distinct from or alien to modern culture. “The missional church avoids ‘we-them’ language.”³⁸

But the New Testament epistles show that the apostles did in fact speak to their largely Gentile churches using the technical and stylized language of the Old Testament Scriptures. They used theological terms like “redemption,” “propitiation,” “living sacrifices,” and so on to describe what God had done for them in Christ. They also used “we-them” language, addressing them as a “holy nation,” “a kingdom of priests,” set apart from the world. Just as preachers used to speak in language that was heavily influenced by the idiom of the King James Bible, so the New Testament writers speak in language heavily influenced by the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), even to the point of using Greek terms with connotations, nuances, and sometimes even meanings not found in the usage of the same words in extra-biblical Greek. They used Greek words like *angelos*, *diathēkē*, and so on, with specialized meanings derived from the Septuagint rather than with the meanings that they had in secular Greek.³⁹ Important Aramaic theological terms also made their way into the Gentile churches, e.g., *abba*, *maranatha*, *amēn*, and *allēluia*. Paul’s letters to the Gentile churches of Galatia and Rome are replete with quotations from Scripture and exegetical arguments over the meanings of biblical terms like “faith,” “promise,” “curse,” “justification,” and so on. Would these terms be considered “jargon” in Keller’s eyes?

³⁷ Keller, “The Missional Church,” p. 1.

³⁸ Keller, “The Missional Church,” p. 2.

³⁹ A pagan with no knowledge of the Scriptures of Israel translated into Greek would have been puzzled at first by the new biblical meanings of these words. In secular Greek, an *angelos* is a “messenger,” but in biblical Greek it is an “angel.” In secular Greek, a *diathēkē* is a “last will and testament,” but in biblical Greek it is often a “covenant.”

In addition to adopting the language and narrative of the Scriptures, these early Gentile churches took on the identity of Israel. Paul presupposes that his Gentile audiences would be able to relate to the biblical stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Hagar and Ishmael (see Rom 4 and 9; Gal 4) because he taught them to view themselves as being addressed by the Scriptures of Israel and as the heirs of its narrative:

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope"
(Rom 15:4).

Paul taught them to view themselves in covenantal terms, as "the Israel of God," as God's "chosen people," as "saints," as God's "holy nation." This is why Paul had to write to the Gentile Christians at Rome to warn them not to boast against the Jewish nation that had largely rejected the gospel (Rom 11:17-25). Why was this even a temptation for them? Because they rightly viewed themselves as wild olive branches grafted in to the main body of the covenant people in place of those native olive branches (Jews) that had rejected the gospel and been broken off. They rightly viewed themselves as the people of God, as the fulfillment and continuation of God's people rooted in his covenants with Abraham and the nation of Israel.

A perusal of the New Testament epistles strongly suggests that the apostles did precisely what Keller and today's proponents of the missional church seek to avoid. The apostles used covenantal (not "tribal") language, stylized prayer, technical jargon, "we-them" terminology and archaic language. Doing so was not a hindrance to the growth of the church in the pagan environment but possibly one of the reasons the church expanded so rapidly. It provided pagans searching for meaning a new group identity as part of the people of God going back to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. Notice how often Paul will say, you were "once" such-and-such, but

“now” this is your new identity in Christ.⁴⁰ He does not hesitate to contrast the old life with the new, which implies another contrast between us and them, between insiders and outsiders, between those who belong to the body of Christ rooted in the ancient traditions of Israel and those who are aliens and foreigners to the covenant of grace. This is the language of conversion and as such provides a powerful evangelistic tool since it enables the new converts to see themselves as having left their old futile pagan way of life (1 Pet 1:18) and joined something new.

Keller’s missional view of worship requires that the covenant language of worship must be downplayed or jettisoned altogether in order not to offend unbelievers or make them feel excluded. But to deride this liturgical covenant language as the encouragement of “tribal” thinking is to deride the covenant itself. If God has indeed created a covenant people by means of redemption and has brought them into a special relationship with himself through Christ, then that is a joyful reality to be celebrated in worship. To fail to joyfully celebrate it and to be ashamed of it will not enhance our witness to the world, for just as the first century Christians knew, the missional power of the covenant lies in its very exclusiveness. The more we dilute the service by orienting it to unbelievers, the less effectual it will be as a testimony to outsiders. It is when we do what we are called to do as God’s holy priesthood that our light will shine the brightest.

Quality Aesthetics

Related to Keller’s notion that the church services ought to avoid jargon and tribal language is his argument that we should try to attract the unregenerate with the aesthetic qualities

⁴⁰ E.g., Rom 6:17-19, 22; 7:5-6; 11:30; 2 Cor 5:16-17; Gal 2:20; 4:9; Eph 2:2-3, 13; 5:8; Col 1:21; 3:7; Titus 3:3. Cp. 1 Pet 2:10.

of the music used in worship. The missional philosophy assumes that the proclamation of the gospel itself is not sufficient and that the church must package the gospel in forms that engage and invite secular people in the culture around us. In his paper "Evangelistic Worship," Keller lists "quality aesthetics" as one of the seven ways of making worship comprehensible to unbelievers and thus enhancing the missional quality of the worship:

d) Quality aesthetics. The power of art draws people to behold it. Good art and its message enters the soul through the imagination and begins to appeal to the reason, for art makes ideas plausible. The quality of music and speech in worship will have a major impact on its evangelistic power. In many churches, the quality of the music is mediocre or poor, but it does not disturb the faithful. Why? Their faith makes the words of the hymn or the song meaningful despite its artistically poor expression, and further, they usually have a personal relationship with the music-presenter. But any outsider who comes in, who is not convinced of the truth and who does not have any relationship to the presenter, will be bored or irritated by the poor offering. In other words, excellent aesthetics *includes* outsiders, while mediocre or poor aesthetics *exclude*. The low level of artistic quality in many churches guarantees that only insiders will continue to come. For the non-Christian, the attraction of good art will have a major part in drawing them in.⁴¹

Keller says that mediocre music in church does not disturb the faithful, because "their faith makes the words of the hymn or the song meaningful despite its artistically poor expression." The unbeliever, by contrast, "who is not convinced of the truth ... will be bored or irritated by the poor offering." So Keller explicitly acknowledges that the difference between believers and unbelievers is the presence or absence of faith. Yet, in spite of the unbelievers' lack of faith, "the attraction of good art will have a major part in drawing them in." But if they lack faith, what are they being drawn to? They are not being drawn to the gospel message but to the "good art." And so what have we accomplished by this good art? We have gotten someone interested in the church's external culture without a corresponding interest in the church's message, the truth of the gospel. In other words, Keller explicitly says that we must package the

⁴¹ Keller, "Evangelistic Worship," p. 7.

gospel in an artistic form attractive to the unregenerate mind that lacks faith. That is a pretty startling thing to say.

Keller would like to argue that the two things go hand-in-hand: "Good art *and its message* enters the soul through the imagination." He seems to view good art as a means by which the Spirit elicits faith. But did not Paul have precisely the opposite view? Did he not say that he refused to employ the sophisticated rhetorical style so desirable to the Hellenistic culture of his day?

"And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor 2:1-5).

If Paul held Keller's assumptions, he would have argued that "lofty speech" and "plausible words of wisdom" are not contrary to but supportive of the message of the gospel, since they help the message to enter the soul "through the imagination." He would have said that we should use good rhetoric to make the message winsome and attractive to unbelievers and to draw them to faith. But Paul evidently held a different view. For him, the message of the cross is incompatible with attempts at "aesthetic quality," since such attempts would cause the faith of the hearers to rest "in the wisdom of men" rather than "in the power of God." Paul speaks of his gospel ministry as a fragrance of death to those who are perishing and a fragrance of life to those who are being saved.

"But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? ¹⁷For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's

word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ" (2 Cor 2:14-17).

Paul recognizes that the gospel message is difficult to understand, but its difficulty is not primarily intellectual but spiritual, since men's minds are blinded by sin.

"But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³And ***even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing***" (2 Cor 4:2-3).

Knowing that some would reject the gospel and that the elect would be converted, he simply preached the gospel and "let the chips fall where they may," refusing to alter the message to make it more palatable or attractive to the unregenerate.

Conclusion

Worship is the activity of the covenant community, God's holy priesthood offering up spiritual sacrifices through Christ. Each element of worship is part of a dialogue of communion between the covenant God and his covenant people. From this covenantal communion of God and his people unbelievers are necessarily excluded, and to seek to include them in the dialogue inevitably leads to a diminishing of that covenantal communion. If we "adapt [our] worship because of the presence of unbelievers,"⁴² the character of worship itself as a covenantal meeting with God for the upbuilding of our faith will be eroded and potentially lost. When we as believers in Christ come together as the church, we shut the doors and leave the world behind to enter the very presence of God, the one place where unbelief is banished and where Christ and his bride may commune with one another without distraction. The concerns, objections, and

⁴² Keller, "Evangelistic Worship," p. 6.

doubts of unbelievers and those not yet committed to Christ ought not to be recognized or given any standing in this time of covenantal communion between Christ and his church. Corporate worship is a sacred time, a holy hour of prayer and fellowship, a meeting between the triune God and his redeemed, covenant people. To engage those who are not members of the covenant community⁴³ is to give them standing and to legitimize their presence at a covenantal transaction of union and communion in which they have no interest or right.

⁴³ Originally this clause read "To address unbelievers"

APPENDIX: RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS⁴⁴

First, should the members of the church invite their non-Christian friends to attend worship with them?

My response: As relational evangelism takes place in our lives during the week at work, school, and in the communities where we live, we may find people who are genuinely interested in learning more about Christianity or in reconnecting with their Christian roots. After we have developed a good relationship with them and when it is clear that they are honestly considering the claims of Christ, we should definitely invite them to attend worship with us and introduce them to the pastor. This is a process and it may take a while before we feel the time is right to bring someone with us to church. Because the inquirer stage is the culmination of a sometimes lengthy process, I do not believe we should expect that everyone will be bringing non-Christian friends on a regular basis. Elders and pastor should not make the members of their church feel guilty if they are not constantly inviting or bringing their friends to church. But they should encourage their members to engage in relational evangelism with their friends, whether or not it leads to the stage where it is appropriate to invite them to church.

Second, should those leading in worship conduct the service in a way that assumes non-Christians are present in worship?

My response: We should always be aware that visitors are present, and we should never assume that all visitors are committed Christians. There should be an awareness that outsiders may be present at any given service. This awareness should cause us to be careful about what we say and how we conduct ourselves so as to be a good testimony and not bring the gospel into

⁴⁴ I want to thank PCA licentiate Jason Park for posing these thoughtful and respectful questions which have enabled me to clarify my position.

disrepute. The worship presider should also acknowledge their presence, welcome them, and show that we are hospitable to visitors. But someone who is not converted will not feel entirely comfortable. The liturgy is a dialogue between God and his covenant people, and so it should not engage unbelievers or cater to them. Unbelievers are essentially bystanders watching something that they aren't able to participate in. As the Gospel Coalition says, "We want to be radically distinct from the culture around us ... We therefore do not see our corporate worship services as the primary connecting point with those outside."⁴⁵

Third, should unbelievers be directly addressed in the preaching of the Word in worship? Should their questions and doubts be addressed directly, thoughtfully and respectfully? For example, the preacher could address questions such as the following: "For those of you exploring Christianity, this text speaks to your needs..." "Some of you might struggle with how a good God can allow evil to happen..." "For those of you who haven't placed your faith in Christ..." "Many assume that to be Christian means to believe..." "Some of you wouldn't identify yourselves as religious..."

My response: Since worship is "a meeting of the triune God with His chosen people" (PCA BCO 47-2), any non-Christians who may be present as visitors are spectators but not participants in the covenantal communion and dialogue that is taking place in worship. Of course, it is not improper to "address" visitors in the sense of acknowledging their presence and welcoming them. But we should not "address" them in the sense of "engaging" them, for this would change the nature of the liturgy from being a meeting of God with his covenant people, gathered in the name of Christ and under his authority, to being an open discussion about competing religious claims for the purpose of apologetics.

⁴⁵ The Gospel Coalition, "Theological Vision for Ministry," pp. 3-4.

I do not believe the worship service is the appropriate place to engage the questions and doubts of unbelievers. Evangelistic Bible studies would be more appropriate places for this type of apologetic engagement. The church is the covenant community where we presuppose an attitude of faith in God and submission to the authority of his Word. To open up the discussion (in the context of worship) to another standpoint, a standpoint of unbelief, undermines the covenantal communion that is taking place between God and his people and is unhelpful and unedifying to the faithful. On the other hand, even Christians may have similar doubts (e.g., struggling with suffering), and the preacher should address those questions from the standpoint of the covenant community that is already in submission to the authority of God's Word, trusting that the Spirit can use the same answers to help those who are outsiders.

The preaching should primarily aim to edify Christians. If the preacher adds a few brief sentences exhorting non-believers to repent and come to Christ, I have no problem with it, as long as it is brief and not the main thrust of the message. However, I do not think that the preacher has an obligation to do this, and I do not prefer that it be done every single Sunday. It is a wisdom call and depends to some degree on whether the preacher has reason to think that there may actually be unbelievers or inquirers present any given Sunday.

Fourth, what about addressing unbelievers while fencing the table during the sacrament of the Lord's Supper? Or what about using the power of the keys to exclude unbelievers from receiving the assurance of pardon?

My response: Of course, unbelievers can be addressed in these ways, warning those who are not members of the covenant community from partaking in the sacrament or from thinking that they are the recipients of the assurance of pardon. When fencing the table, the minister should be welcoming in this sense: "If you are interested in making a profession of faith and

getting baptized so that you can participate in the Lord's Supper with us, please speak with one of the elders or the pastor after the service."

Fifth, don't you believe in the free offer of the gospel? If so, what would be wrong with offering the gospel in a worship setting?

My response: Yes, I believe in the free offer of the gospel, but it can take different forms. One form is the invitation to those who do not profess to be Christians to become such by turning from their sin, putting their trust in Christ, and getting baptized. This is the form seen most clearly in the evangelistic sermons in the book of Acts. But another form of the free offer is what we may call its "covenantal" form, that is, the free offer couched in terms appropriate for the covenant community of those who are already baptized. I find it interesting that in the pages of the New Testament the free offer of the gospel is most often addressed to the covenant community (e.g., the Gospel of John passim; 2 Cor 5:20–6:2; Heb 4:1-11). The reason for this, I think, is that the covenant community is composed of professing believers and their children, and as such it is a mixed community that contains both regenerate and unregenerate members. Those within the covenant community, such as baptized covenant children who have not yet made a public profession of faith in Christ, need to be called to do so. And even the regenerate are in constant need of being reminded and exhorted to truly believe the gospel that they profess. Therefore, the gospel must be offered in the first instance to the covenant community. But the content of the gospel message concerning the person and work of Christ is not at all different from what the unbaptized need to hear. So I would be more comfortable with sermons that express the free offer in this second "covenantal" manner, trusting that the Spirit can also use the same message to convert those who are not yet baptized members of the covenant community.