

Worship
The Word: The Key Element of Worship
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Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher
Countryside Bible Church

Well, we are coming to the end of our journey through the first part of this year on the theme of worship. My plan is this week to address one element of worship that is the place of the Word in worship. And next week to address the issue of music and music in worship, that may take two weeks because its such a controversial subject, and we want to make sure we understand it from the Scripture. And then, if the Lord wills, we'll go from there into the book of Ephesians. I've enjoyed already getting my feet wet in the book of Ephesians and doing some reading and studying over the last few weeks looking forward to that journey. As Tom Beswick told me this morning in elder's prayer time he said, "Well, at least you know where you'll be for the next couple of years." And there is something to be said for that.

But this morning I want us to look again at the issue of worship, and specifically the role that the Word of God plays in our worship. In 2004, 1100 pastors and church leaders from the emerging church movement gathered for a convention. Doug Pagitt, pastor of an emerging church in Minneapolis called Solomon's Porch (some of you perhaps have read about it), had this to say to all of those pastors who were assembled there. He said, "Preaching is broken, why do I get to speak for 30 minutes, and you don't. A sermon" he said, "is often a violent act, its violence toward the will of the people who have to sit there and take it."

Rudy Carrasco, an emergent pastor from Pasadena, agreed that preaching is, in fact, passé, that it's too one-sided, it's too authoritative for the culture in which we live. He said, "Every day, every week there's stuff that pops up in life, and it's not resolved, just crazy and confusing and painful. When people come across with 3 answers, and they know everything, and they have this iron sheen about them, I'm turned off period, I'm just turned off, and I think that's not unique to me." They went on to suggest that preaching in this contemporary culture doesn't really fit.

So, what are they suggesting? What should take the place of the Word read and taught? What they suggested is that a completely open conversation in which everyone is considered equal better suits our post-modern culture. Some emergent style churches have taken that to heart; they have done away with pastors and replaced them with what they call narrators who lead in a sort of free-flowing dialogue. So, the church gets together, and there's a narrator to lead the discussion. Now, why would they come to this? Well, understand that they embrace the

contemporary pagan philosophy of post-modernism. Post-modernism simply says that there is not absolute truth, and if there is absolute truth, it can never be known, so let's just all share.

There are other modern replacements for the reading and the teaching of the Word, not just discussion. In some churches it's about entertainment, it's about drama and skits, movie clips. Believe it or not, I get mail as a pastor, there are actually websites designed for pastors, to which pastors can go and learn spiritual lessons drawn from the current movies. So, you show a movie clip, and you talk about it; that's church.

In many churches music has supplanted the place of the Word. In fact, in some churches the word worship has become synonymous with music. We're going to worship the leader says as he begins the singing and what comes later apparently is not worship. This has led many to think that only singing and music is worship. Now you know that I love music, and we'll look at the place of music in worship Lord willing next week. But music is not and cannot be a replacement for the Word. The Word should be central in the church. It should be read, and it should be taught. But today it is almost an endangered species, and that devaluation of Scripture begins not with the people, but with the leaders of the church, like priests, like people. But that's not how it ought to be. The Word ought to be central.

Now that raises an important question: is there, in fact, scriptural warrant for the primacy of the word of God in our worship? Let me say that again, this is the key issue. Is there scriptural warrant; is there a biblical foundation for saying that the Word of God ought to be central in the worship of His people? This morning I want to prove to you from the Word of God that; in fact, the Word of God must be the key element in all true worship.

Biblical worship, as you know, occurs in various context and venues. We're commanded to worship privately and individually. And I trust that you take time out of every day or most days to do that. We're commanded to worship with our families, to fathers to lead our families in worship. We're commanded to worship together corporately as the church when we come together on the Lord's Day. And there's a sense in which we could say all of life for the Christian is an act of worship. But folks regardless of what venue we are talking about, whoever is present, wherever there is true worship, the Word will always be primary.

John Calvin, speaking of the Roman Catholic Church of his day wrote this, "Although they put forward temple, priesthood and the rest of the outward shows, this empty glitter which blinds the eye of the simple ought not to move us a wit to grant that the church exists where God's Word is

not found. For this is the abiding mark with which our Lord has sealed His own. He who is of God hears the words of God.”

Martin Luther put it like this, “The only mark of the Christian Church is following and obeying the Word, when that is gone, let men boast as much as they please, “the church the church.” There is nothing to their boasting. Therefore, you should say, do the people have the Word of God there, and do they accept it to? Wherever one hears the Word of God, there is the church of God.” [Luther goes on to say,] “The greatest and principle purpose of every church service” [listen to this carefully,] “the greatest and principle purpose of every church service is to preach and teach God’s Word.”

The reformers obviously spoke with one voice in saying that the Word of God is central in the worship of God. It is the “razon Detra” of corporate worship; it is as they called it the royal sacrament.

You see one of the greatest issues of the Reformation was deciding the nature of Christian ministry. The Roman Catholic Church claimed that the ministry was all about priesthood and administering rituals. That’s why if you go into a Roman Catholic Church to this day you see an altar front and center, because it’s about sacrifices and priesthood and sacerdotal duties. Luther and Calvin and the rest of the reformers came along and said “no,” the ministry is not sacerdotal, that is having to do with priestly functions. But it’s a ministry of the Word of God. And, by the way, they spoke that reality through their architecture.

That’s why this morning I’m standing here behind a pulpit in the center of the room with all eyes and seats geared toward this focal point rather than an altar being here and my being behind a podium over on the side. They saw that eventually the architecture would influence the worship of the people, and they wanted people to know and be clear that the central point that the worship of the church of Jesus Christ was the Word of God.

So, it’s clear that this is what the Reformers believed. But although we honor them for their works sake, they are not our authority. So, the question that we have to ask is this, does the Bible teach that the Word is the key element in worship? And the short answer is, “Yes it does.” If you examine the Bible, you’ll quickly see that this has consistently been the pattern of the people of God. Wherever God’s Word is, God is, and worship follows. Conversely, if God’s word is not present front and center, God is not there to bless either. If you want to worship, you

must embrace the Word of God as the key element in your individual and private worship, and in the worship of the church together.

Now, I want you to see this principle is throughout the flow of biblical history. I'm going to take a little time this morning and walk you through Old and New Testament alike and show you this. Because we live in a day when this is not believed. In fact, there are many churches that stand contrary to what I'm telling you this morning. So, I don't want you to take it from me, I want you to see it from the pages of Scripture itself. So, if you want to see the word as the key element of worship. You can see it in a variety of ways. I want first to take you back to the pattern of Old Testament worship, the pattern of Old Testament worship.

Now, it's clear when you look at the Old Testament when individuals worshiped God, it was part and parcel of the Word of God. You see it in in the Psalms. Over and over again you see the psalmist, David and other writers connecting with the word of God that which is the touchstone for their worship. You see it in Psalm 19. Read Psalm 119, the longest of the Psalms, and what is it? It's a declaration to God, a prayer prayed to God and every verse reminds God of how important the Word is in the psalmist's relationship to God. So, there is no question but what individually the Word was central to the worship of Old Testament believers.

But what about the corporate worship, what about the tabernacle, that tent that was constructed at Sinai and stayed with the people all the way until Solomon built a permanent structure? What about the temple? Let's look at those two, what happened there. Now when you think of the tabernacle and later the temple, what do you think of? You probably think of sacrifices and animal the sacrifices that were made there, and that's true. The tabernacle and later the temple were a focal point for animal sacrifice because that was to picture the reality of the coming sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But both of them, both tabernacle and temple served other purposes as well. For example, they were places of prayer. You remember when Jesus threw the moneychangers out of the temple, what did He say? You have made My Father's house which is supposed to be a house of prayer, a den of thieves.

It was also a place for the singing of praise. We'll talk about that a little next week, Lord willing. But both tabernacle and temple were central in teaching the people the Word of God. Most people aren't aware of this, and I want to show you this, this morning. Specifically, there were a group of people who had this assignment; they were descendants of Levi, one of the twelve tribes. They were responsible to teach. They were called Levites after their tribe, Levi.

Now they had other responsibilities as well, but one of their primary responsibilities was to teach the people God's Word.

Listen to Deuteronomy 33:10; Moses describing the responsibility of the Levites said, "They shall teach Your ordinances to Jacob, and Your law to Israel..." This was part of their job description. This was their role. Now, not only did they teach those people who came to Jerusalem, eventually to the temple and earlier to Shiloh and other places where the tabernacle was, but the Levites were distributed (according to Joshua 21), the Levites were distributed across the land of Israel, so that there was always a Levite near you and his responsibility was to teach the people throughout the land.

Now, when did they teach them? Well, you remember the commandment, six days you shall work and what, the seventh shall be set apart for the Lord your God. And so, it was in that seventh day, it was on the Sabbath (or Shabbat as it's called), that the Levites would teach the people weekly the Word of God. By the way if you want to read some more about this, look at 2 Chronicles 17. I won't turn there this morning, but in 2 Chronicles 17, under the reforms of Jehoshaphat, he sends out Levites throughout the land to teach the people because there was such a hunger and a need for them to understand the Scripture.

Now you have the Levites, but there was one special group of Levites that were the priests. Not only were they descendants of Levi, but they were also descendants of Aaron, Moses' brother. The priests offered the sacrifices. That was one of their primary functions, and that's how we think of priests, isn't it? But they also had a responsibility to teach the people the law of God. In Leviticus 10:11 Moses spells out their responsibilities like this, "... [they are] to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them through Moses."

Some of the Levites also had the responsibility not only of teaching but of making copies of the Law of God. Of course, this is long before the printing press, and so in order to make copies there had to be someone skilled in writing who would make a copy of the Scripture. And they were responsible to do that. And those Levites who did that task were called scribes. Perhaps the most famous scribe in all of Old Testament history is a man by the name of Ezra. Ezra's ministry really provides the foundation for the proper use of the Word in worship. I want you to turn back to Nehemiah, and I want you to see this firsthand.

In Ezra, the book that has his name, we're told that Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it and to teach its statutes and its ordinances in Israel. This was Ezra's life

purpose, to study the law, to practice it and to teach it in Israel. That was his assignment as well as a Levite as a priest and as a scribe.

Now notice how he carries this mission out in Nehemiah 8. I want you to see Ezra functioning in this role, and this gives a little bit of a glimpse of the kind of ministry these men had. And of course, in this case a very special ministry in Ezra's case. Nehemiah 8:1, "And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel."

Now remember the context here. They have rebuilt the walls, and in that context they realize they've let the Law of God slip. And so, notice, they ask (that is all the people asked) Ezra to bring the book of the law, this was motivated by the people of Israel.

Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men and women and all who *could* listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. [We also, by the way, just as an aside have a responsibility to expose our children as soon as they have the capacity to understand which is what is said here. Now in verse 3 we have a summary of what happened that day.] He [that is Ezra] read from it [the law of God] before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning [literally from the light, in other words from the break of day] until midday, [about 6 hours] in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

For 6 hours, now he didn't read incessantly all of that time, verses 4 - 8 tell us a little more about the specifics of what happened that morning. Verse 4 says,

Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood ... [these 13 Levites.] Verse 5, Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people ... [By the way, if this sounds very familiar to some things we do in the New Testament church, it should, because those things are modeled in some ways after this great example. There's a podium, there's a pulpit, there's the Word, there's someone in front who opens the book in the sight of all the people.] And when he opened it [verse 5 says] ... the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands, then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with *their* faces to the ground. [He hasn't even gotten to the reading yet. Just seeing it

and these people are worshiping the Lord, then verse 7 says,] the Levites explained the law to the people while the people *remained* in their place. [And then verse 8 fills it in a little more,] They read from the book, (that is from) from the Word of God, from the law of God, translating (that's probably not the best translation of that word actually, it could be they were translating from Hebrew into Aramaic, the language the people had come to speak, more likely it means explaining. And in the *New American Standard* you can see that is in the side margin there.) They read from the law from the book, from the law of God, explaining it to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

So, they read, and they explained it, they taught it so that people understood it. This is the basis for an expositional style of ministry that we embrace. This is what Ezra did. This is the responsibility the Levites had in the Old Testament: to teach the people. Read the Bible, explain the Bible.

Now, not just the priests or Levites had this responsibility, but also the prophets. The prophets also played a role in instructing the people. I won't turn there but in 2 Kings 4:38 and 6:32, both in 2 Kings. Those verses imply that on the weekly Sabbath and at the new moon celebrations each month, the people went to the prophets to be taught. The prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel were written down and distributed as printed sermons for the people to teach them the ways of God. The people would regularly come (you remember in Ezekiel's time), to sit in Ezekiel's home and to listen and to be taught, and they would pay careful attention or at least would appear to, but in Ezekiel 33 he chastises them for not really caring. They sit and look like they're listening, but they're not listening. I'm not going to ask you for a show of hands.

So, the prophets were responsible to teach, as were the priests, and the Levites. Toward the end of Old Testament history, a new way emerges to teach the people the Word of God and that was the synagogue. Now we don't know exactly when synagogues began, but most scholars believe that they began sometime during the Babylonian exile. Jewish tradition identifies Ezra as the founder of the synagogue system. But regardless, wherever there were 10 Jewish males, and this holds true to this day, wherever there were 10 Jewish males, a synagogue could be formed.

They met and still do on every Sabbath, every Shabbat on every Saturday. If you go in a synagogue even today, and this is true from the very beginning still true today, you go in a synagogue the chief articles of furniture are the chest or the ark for the scrolls that is for the Word of God, and the platform or pulpit for the reading. That is central. On every Shabbat, the

service always centers on the reading and explaining of the Word. Philo, the Greek writer or excuse me the Jewish writer, described the synagogue like this,

“They come to the holy place, it’s called synagogues, according to their age and order, the young men sit under the elders at their feet and with a decent composure attend to the hearing. When one taking the book reads and another, one of the most skillful explains what is not known.”

Read the Bible; explain the Bible, that’s what happened in the synagogues (on a weekly basis), to the people of God. So, you can see when you look at a sort of overview of Old Testament history whether you’re talking about the Levites in the Tabernacle and the temple or spread throughout the land and all of the cities teaching the people, whether you’re talking about the prophets teaching the people or whether you’re talking about eventually the synagogues, constantly the focus of Old Testament worship was the Word of God.

Now we get a further glimpse of its importance not only by studying the pattern of Old Testament worship, but let’s hurry forward to the New Testament and look at the pattern of Christ; the pattern of Christ. When you look at our Lord, the Word was central in His life and ministry. Our Lord’s ministry was one of reading and teaching the Word.

I want to show you this in the gospel of Luke. Turn to Luke 2, Jesus set the tone for His ministry at the age of 12, when He and His parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover, you remember the story here in Luke 2. Beginning in verse 41, “... [they] went up every year at the ... Passover and Jesus went with them, and when He ... [was] twelve, they went up *there* according to the custom ... [when] they were returning after spending [all the days there] ..., ... Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But His parents ... [didn’t know] it. [They were with a large group from their city probably several hundred people. Somehow they thought Jesus was with someone else, with the other parent, perhaps the parents got separated in the process.]

So, they go a day’s journey out. They realize they don’t have Jesus. They come a day’s journey back to Jerusalem arriving probably in the evening. Then they spend the better part of the next day, the third day looking for Him, and they find Him, notice verse 46, “Then, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions.”

Now here is Jesus at twelve years old, already diligently wanting to know and understand the Scripture. His life was already about the Word. But He wasn't just learning, although He was doing just that, notice the next verse, verse 47, "And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers." He wasn't just asking questions, He was answering questions, He was teaching already, at the age of twelve, and undoubtedly, they were amazed because He deduced from Scripture what they themselves had never seen.

Now that's the only insight we have into Jesus in His youth. We fast forward 18 years from His twelfth year 'til the year He turns 30. And then He begins His ministry and after those 18 years of silence, Jesus begins His ministry, and the focal point of His ministry is teaching and reading the Word in the synagogues on the Sabbath.

Turn over to Luke 4:14, here's Jesus public ministry. This is right after the temptation, you remember. He was baptized. The temptation came, and it says, verse 14,

... Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. And He *began* teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. [This was Jesus' ministry including even His hometown Nazareth.] Look at verse 16, ... He came to Nazareth where He'd been brought up; and [watch this] as was His custom, [this was His habit] He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it is written. "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME," [and so forth.] Verse 20, And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him.

Now He sits down because in that day teachers sat, and so He reads from the Bible standing, he hands it back to the person who is to put it away, and then He sits to teach. And He teaches them, all the eyes in the synagogue [verse 20 says] were fixed on Him, And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." [... and He was speaking gracious words.] Verse 22 says, and they were amazed at His teaching because after all isn't this Joseph's boy.

This was Jesus' ministry, Jesus read the Bible, and then He explained the Bible. Jesus was an expository preacher. That was His ministry, this was His practice. Now after He was rejected at Nazareth, and He was. You remember He preached that great sermon, and how was He

responded to? Well they tried to kill Him. Why? Because He told them they were blind; they were spiritually blind; they were spiritually oppressed; they were enslaved to their sin; and they needed somebody to free them. And they were insulted; and so they carry Him out to kill Him. But Jesus still continues His ministry, in the synagogues, verse 31,

... He came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and He was teaching them on the Sabbath; and they were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority.

There were no discussions. Jesus wasn't a narrator, leading in a discussion. He taught with authority; He preached the Word of God. This was His practice; look down in verse 44 of this same chapter, "So He kept on preaching" [not only in the synagogues of Galilee but] "in the synagogues of Judea."

This is what Jesus did, not only did He teach in the synagogues however both all over the land of Israel, both in Galilee and down in Judea; but He also taught the people when they came to worship at the temple as well; that central worship spot.

Turn over to Luke 19, and you can see Jesus during the Passion Week, this is described very clearly in Luke 19:47. "... He was teaching daily in the temple, but the chief priests and scribes and the leading men among the people were trying to destroy Him." Chapter 20:1, "On one of the days while He was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel...."

Do you see a theme in Jesus' ministry? 21:37, "Now during the day He was teaching in the temple," Jesus literally set up court on the temple grounds and began teaching the people. This was His ministry; read the Bible, explain the Bible. As you would expect the people responded to His teaching, we already read that they were amazed because He taught as one having authority, not as the scribes. But look at Luke 19:48, back a couple of pages, Luke 19:48. "... the people were hanging on to every word He said."

His teaching was compelling; they couldn't help themselves; they had to listen. So, when you look at the ministry and life of Jesus, you see His ministry and particularly His worship. Every Sabbath Jesus was reading the Bible and teaching the Bible. The thrust of the ministry and worship of Jesus Christ was the Word of God. And in so doing, He sets an example for all of us; for our church and for each of us individually.

So, we can see the primacy of the Word in the pattern of Old Testament worship, number one, number two in the pattern and example of Christ.

A third way we can see the importance of the Word in worship is the pattern of the New Testament church. Let's leave the ministry of Christ now and go to look at the church in the New Testament. After Christ's ascension, this was the priority and the pattern of the apostles. Turn to the book of Acts. You remember in Acts 2, Peter preaches that great sermon on the day of Pentecost, 3000 people are added to the church, and how did the church respond? What were the priorities of that first Jerusalem church? Look at 2:42, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching...."

The church in its earliest days was committed to the Scripture. The apostle's explanation, the Jesus explanation of the Old Testament, to the apostle's teaching. In 6:4, we learn from the mouth of Peter that this is what their job description was. Acts 6:4, "... we will devote ourselves" [we apostles will devote ourselves] "to prayer and to the ministry of the word." This is what we do.

Over in chapter 10 as Peter interacts with Cornelius, gives him the gospel; listen to what he says. Acts 10:42, "... [Jesus] ordered us to preach to the people...." He didn't order us to have discussions. He ordered us to preach to the people. Acts is a series of sermons delivered by the apostles. Turn over to Acts 13. You see it in the ministry of Paul as well. In Acts 13:5 we read that, "When they reached Salamis, they *began* to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews;" This was the thrust again of their ministry, verse 15, "After the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue officials sent to them saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it."

What do you think; does Paul have anything he wants to say? So, he preaches, he explains the Scripture. You see it in the Christian church as well though, not merely in the synagogues, but in those services where the church meets. Turn over to Acts 20. You see two examples here, in Acts 20. This is one of the first glimpse we get of the New Testament church meeting in corporate worship. Acts 20:7, "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul *began* talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message" [or his word, his speech, his sermon] "until midnight."

My kind of preaching, you know the rest of the story, (he falls) you know there's the young man who falls and is killed, and Paul raises him from the dead. Remarkable story, but I don't want

you to miss the point here, that the focal point of the New Testament church's worship was the Word of God. Later in that same chapter in verse 17, Paul sent for the Ephesian elders and listen to what he says to them about his ministry among them, verse 20. I remember he was there by the way for a long time, and he says to them, verse 20, "... I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you publicly and from house to house." That's what my ministry was. Verse 25, "... I went about preaching the kingdom..." Verse 27, "... I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." Verse 32, "... I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

The focus of Paul's ministry among the Ephesians was the Word of God. You see it when you look at the life and ministry of the apostles. You see it in the New Testament when you look at the elders' role in the church. You can see the priority or primacy of the Word in the assignment elders are given in each church. What are the elders to do? First Timothy 5:17 says they are to labor at teaching and preaching. Second Timothy 2:2, they are to teach others so that they can pass it on to the next generation. And that classic passage in 2 Timothy 4:2 where Paul says to Timothy: "preach the word; ... [do it] in season ... [do it] out of season, [do it when it's popular and do it when it's not.] I just want you to proclaim, to herald the Word of God, that's your assignment Timothy as a pastor as an elder. When you see the clear commands that are given to the church in the New Testament, it's clear that this is to be the *prima prime* part of worship. The Old Testament and a growing body of New Testament inspired documents were to be read and taught in the corporate worship of the New Testament church.

Turn to 1 Timothy 4, 1 Timothy 4. listen to the instructions Paul gives his young son in the faith. First Timothy 4:11, I want you to "Prescribe and teach these things." [Teach.] ["... don't let anybody] look down on your youthfulness, ... be an example instead of those who believe." verse 13, "Until I come," [Timothy here's what I want you to do] "give attention to the *public reading of Scripture*," [I want you to read the Bible when the church gathers and] "to exhortation and teaching." [I want you to teach the Bible, and I want you to urge the people to do it and to obey it. This is what I want you to do Timothy.] "Don't neglect the spiritual gift within you," verse 15, "Take pains with these things;" verse 15, "be absorbed in them..."

Did you did you notice that Timothy's chief assignment when the church gathered publicly was two things; read the Scripture and teach the Scripture. That primarily had reference to the Old Testament, but in addition to the Old Testament, Paul's letters were to be read and explained in the New Testament church as well. In 1 Thessalonians 5:27, he says, "I adjure you..." Paul

does at the end of his letter to the Thessalonians, “I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.”

The Word was to be central in the New Testament church. We see that in the New Testament, but even when you go beyond the New Testament into the history of the early church after the apostles, this is true. You see the priority of the Word in worship in the testimony of the early church fathers. The earliest record, the very first record outside the Bible that we have of the Christian churches worship is found in the writings of Justin Martyr who wrote in the middle of the second century. And in his writing called *First Apology*, he gives us that first record; listen to what he writes.

“On the day called Sunday all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits, then when the leader has ceased the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things, then we all rise together and pray and as we said before when our prayer is ended bread and wine are brought for the Lord’s Table.”

That was the worship of the early church in the middle of the second century. And notice the centrality of the Word of God. So, you can see that. It’s always been central. It’s always been the key element of worship, whether you’re going back to the Old Testament and the Levites and the temple and the tabernacle and the prophets or the synagogues, or you’re coming to the New Testament and to the life of the church. It’s always been central to worship. Why? That’s the question that came to my mind. Why is the word central? You’ve got all those other elements. Well the Scripture doesn’t tell us specifically. But I think we can guess at two possible reasons, why the word is central.

One possible reason is because every other element of worship goes from us to God. That is the one element of worship that comes from God to us. Giving, singing, praying, observing the ordinances, those are all things we do and offer to God, but when we read and hear the Word of God taught, we are hearing and witnessing a divine work, the word is not ours but God’s Word. You need to know that I too sit under the authority of the Word of God. My prayer before I ever get up here is Lord teach my own heart, help me to do these things. I don’t speak to you as one who has it all wired; I speak to you as one of you simply being used by God as we all listen together to the Word of God. The rest of the elements of worship consist of our speaking to God, but the Word is that in which God speaks to us.

I think there is another reason the Word must be central. I think the Word is also the key element of worship because the Word shapes and forms all the other elements of worship to be acceptable to God. The only reason I know what singing should be and how it should be and what the object of it should be is because the Word. The only reason I know how to give is because of the Word. And so forth. So, the Word is central, it's primary in all true worship.

Now, I hope you got that point. I hope you understand that truth. But let me ask you this question. How does this apply? How does the fact that the Word is to be primary in worship apply? Let's think first about how it applies in the church as a whole.

First of all, folks, you and I must make sure that our church and our corporate worship remains centered on the ministry of the Word. There are other good churches in our area, but there are far too many that do not hold the Word of God central in their worship, the reading of the Word and the explaining of the Word, that we must continue to do. We must protect at all costs, because where the Word is, God is; and where the Word is not, God is not.

Secondly, in terms of the church as a whole, this issue really becomes a sort of litmus test in evaluating the health of our church as well as the health of other churches. Some, at some point, many of you may have to leave this area, you may move somewhere, and you're going to be faced with the daunting task of identifying a church. This is how you can test a church. Ask yourself, is the reading and expositional teaching of the Bible central in its worship? That's always been the pattern of God's people, if it's not then run away.

What about individually? How does the centrality of the Word in worship apply to you individually and to me individually? Well, first of all I think it's a test of the genuineness of our faith. You see if you claim to be a Christian, but you have no desire to read the Word of God, to listen to it, to learn the Word of God, no matter what you claim, I can assure you that you are not a Christian. Everybody in Texas is a Christian; just ask them, they'll tell you everybody here this morning is a Christian. I could go around and ask everyone in this room if they are a Christian, and almost everybody here would say I'm a Christian. Is that true? Probably not.

Spurgeon estimated that only 40-50% of the people in his church were genuinely Christian. If that was true of Spurgeon, what must be true of me. Let me give you a test. What is your relationship to the Word of God? I can guarantee you that if you don't love and desire to learn and seek to obey the Word of God, you are not a Christian regardless of what you claim. How can I guarantee you that? Listen to Christ Himself, John 8:47, "He who is of God" [the one who

has been born by God, who has been birthed by God, that one] “hears the words of God; for this reason, you do not hear them, because you are not of God.”

Your relationship to the Word of God tells you everything you need to know about your relationship to God. If you love the Scripture, and you seek to obey it, you are in Christ, and if you don't, you're not. Psalm 1:2 says that the righteous person can be evaluated based on his delight in and meditation on the Word of God. That's how you can identify a righteous person.

Jesus says that only those who hear His words and do them are His true disciples. The word tells you everything you need to know about the true state of your soul. Don't kid yourself this morning. I don't care when you prayed a prayer, how long you've been in the church if you don't love the Bible, and you aren't seeking to obey the Bible, then you are not in Christ. Don't deceive yourself.

A second way we should respond to the primacy of the Word of God in worship individually is by properly responding to the Scripture itself when we read it or when we hear it. How should we respond to it? When you hear it, when you read the Scripture, and you're in your own private worship, or you read it here with all of us, or you hear me teach it, or you hear someone else teach it, how should you respond? The Baptist Puritan, John Gill wrote a massive work called *The Body of Divinity*, he divides hearers of the words, hearers of the Word into four categories, I love this. You're one of these four, he says.

“You may be a sponge, now sponges,” he said, “are those that attract and suck in all both good and bad, they receive and like all they hear.” You know they hear John MacArthur and say, “Oh man that was great.” They hear Chuck Swindoll and say, “Oh that was great.” They hear Benny Hinn, Oh that was great.” Joel Olsteen, “Oh that was wonderful.” They're sponges, they just suck it all in, and it all seems like good and bad alike to them.

“A second group of listeners,” he said, “are hour glasses.” And hour glasses he says the sun runs quick out of one glass into another so some hearers what they hear with one ear they let run out of the other. These are people who hear and say that was a great message as they leave, and they never think about it again. They're hour glasses.

“A third kind of listeners,” he said, “are strainers.” Like cloth strainers they let all the good wine pass through and retain only the dregs and the leaves. These are people who miss the point and

they are always going after some little rabbit trail somewhere. But they miss the big picture like the Pharisees who strained a gnat out of their water and swallowed a camel.

He said, “the fourth kind of listeners are sieves.” “Sieves let pass everything that is good for nothing and only retain the fine flour.” That’s the kind of listener we’re to be.

You do respond to the Word as its read and taught? But how should you respond? Well you should respond by listening, receiving, and believing it. Listening, receiving, and believing it. First Thessalonians 2:13, “For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which performs its work in you who believe.”

You should test it, when you hear the word of God taught you should test it. Be like the Bereans in Acts 17:11, “they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scripture daily to see whether those things were so.” Don’t take my word for it. I’m not inspired, come to the Scripture and say, is that what it says? You should receive it, believe it, and listen, but you should also test it.

And finally, you should apply and obey it. Apply it and obey it. James 1:22, “Prove yourself doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”

That’s how we ought to respond to the word, when it has the primary place in worship that it ought to have. Now if you’re a Christian here this morning, you have an appetite for the Scripture. You already do, God’s given it to you. But you must choose to feed that appetite. As we close our time together, I want you to turn to one last passage. Turn to Luke 10. I read this to you several weeks ago, but I want you to come back because it makes a crucial point, Luke 10 at the very end of the chapter we have the account of Jesus stay at Mary and Martha’s home. Verse 38,

[Jesus comes there] Martha welcomes Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord’s feet listening to His word. [But] Martha was distracted with all her preparations; she came up *to Him* and said, “Lord, don’t You care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.” [But] the Lord answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha you’re worried and bothered about so many things, but *only* one thing is necessary, and Mary has chosen ... [that].”

You see what Jesus says, Mary chose the best. What did she choose? She chose worship. Mary chose what Christ said was the one thing necessary. But exactly what form did her worship take; what was it she chose? look back at verse 39, “she was seated at the Lord’s feet, listening to His word.” That is worship, and that is central to worship. May you and I both individually and corporately make the same choice.

Let’s pray together.

Our Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the great reminder that when we come to worship You, whether together as a church or individually, the Word must always be central. Thank You for the example of the Old Testament believers. Thank You for the example of our Lord, whose life was all about the Word. And Father, thank you as well for the example in pattern and commands of the New Testament that bring us to that very point.

Lord, help each of us individually to devote our time to the Word, to worshipping You in and through Your Word.

And Father, I pray that as a church You would guard us, protect us from drifting from that crucial element of worship from devaluing it, from not appreciating it.

Father, I pray for the person here this morning who claims to be a Christian but knows in their heart of hearts that there is no love for or desire for the Word of God, no real obedience too. Father, don’t let them kid themselves, don’t let them deceive themselves. Remove the self-deception today, and help them to see themselves as You see them. And may You draw them to Yourself in Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.