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Marks of a Healthy Church
Mark Eight: Biblical Worship
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On February12, A.D. 304 a group of men was brought before the Roman proconsul in Carthage. The charge against them read, "These men, being Christians, have held an assembly for the Eucharist, in violation of the edict of the Emperors Diocletian and Maximian."

"What is your position?" the Proconsul asked of the first prisoner.

"I am a senator," the man responded. His name was Dativus.

"Were you present at the assembly?"

"I am a Christian and I was present in the assembly."

Immediately, the Proconsul ordered him to be hung on the rack, where barbed hooks tore his body. After that, Saturninus, the presbyter, was brought in and asked, "Did you, contrary to the orders of the emperors, oversee the assembly of these men?"

Saturninus responded, "Yes. We celebrated the Eucharist."

"Why?" asked the Proconsul.

"Because the Eucharist cannot be abandoned," said the presbyter.

Immediately he, too, was taken to join Dativus on the rack.

Next, Felix, one of Saturninus' sons and a reader in the church, was brought before the Proconsul. "I am not asking if you are a Christian. That's not my concern. But were you at the assembly and do you possess copies of the scriptures?"

Felix answered, "As if a Christian could exist without the Eucharist, or the Eucharist could be celebrated without Christians! Don't you realise that a Christian is defined by the Eucharist? We cannot exist without it! And we always read the Lord's scriptures when we assemble for the Eucharist."

The Proconsul flew into a rage and ordered Felix beaten with clubs.

Lastly, Hilarion, another son of Saturninus, was brought before the Proconsul. "Will you follow your father and your brothers?" He was asked.

"I am a Christian," he boldly said, "And I became one, along with my father and brothers, of my own will."

The Proconsul bellowed out threats of torture. Little did he know that he was not going up against men, but against God himself in his holy martyrs. The Proconsul ordered the boy taken away and for his hair to be shorn and his nose and ears to be cut off.

And Hilarion simply replied, "Do what you will. I am a Christian."

And as he was led away, the whole court heard the boy crying out with joy, "Thanks be to God." In all, forty-nine members of the church in Abitinae were martyred on that day and in the days that followed.[1]

The story of those brothers and sisters is not unique. From the time of the Apostles until the time of Constantine, Christians gathered together to worship—to read the scriptures, to pray, to sing, to eat the Lord's Supper—and they did so under threat of violence and sometimes even martyrdom. "Day by day we are besieged; day by day we are betrayed," wrote Tertullian.[2] But no matter the risks involved, Christians continued to gather. They had found the treasure hidden in the field. They had found the pearl of great price. They had given their allegiance, to the exclusion of all others, to the Lord Jesus. And they lived in sure and certain hope that his kingdom was coming "on earth as in heaven".

What brought them together? If it was just a longing for fellowship with God, they could do that at home in private. They could pray, they could sing. Those were the days before mass-produced Bibles, but they could, at home, recite passages from memory or read hand-copied portions of scripture. But they risked their lives to gather *together* for corporate worship. It was the Lord's Supper that reminded them, as it does us, "that we are true members of the mystical body" of God's Son. St. Paul uses that language of the body a lot. As we are in Jesus the Messiah, so we belong one to another. We are a family, a covenant people with a God-given mission that cannot be accomplished unless we all bring our parts together to build up the whole. And the Lord's Supper reminded them that it was all absolutely worth it, because the Supper recalled the events—the death and resurrection of Jesus—in which God poured out his love, his grace, his mercy and revealed his faithfulness in all its—in all *his*—glory, while also pointing them to his future glory when he will finish what he has begun and set all things to rights. No command of Caesar could compete with the glorious calling of God.

Yes, the New Testament commands us to gather together for corporate worship. Hebrews 10:24-25 tells us:

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

And Paul so frequently, particularly in Romans and 1 Corinthians, stresses our unity in Jesus and the nature of the Church as being like a body in which we all have our part. But even without those commands and instructions to gather together, the Lord's Supper reminds us who we are, that we're not loners, that Christianity isn't just "me, my Bible, and Jesus", but that we are a covenant *people* knit together in love and grace in Jesus and the Spirit. Even if all we had was the Lord's Supper, we would still be compelled, like those early believers, to gather

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[1] Adapted from the Acts of St. Saturninus in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. VIII, 688ff.
[2] *Apology* 7.

together to worship the God who reveals himself in and through Jesus.

So we've been looking at the marks of a healthy church. If we don't gather, there is no church. The Church gathers to worship. Period. So the question is not whether or not we will gather, but what our gatherings should looks like. What does the Bible tell us about corporate worship?

Well, first, there's no book or chapter in the New Testament that gives us specific instructions outlining liturgy or posture, how often we should observe the Lord's Supper, how many songs we should sing, how long the sermon should be, or anything like that. The New Testament does have plenty to say about worship, but what it says is largely about our unity in worship, our serving others in worship, giving ourselves as living sacrifices in worship—and when it comes to specifics, it's usually Paul stepping in to tell churches what *not* to do. The Bible gives us freedom in our worship, and so some churches use a liturgy with set prayers and others use a set order of service with extempore prayers, some churches have elaborate ceremonial—whether that involves incense, postures, vestments, and the like or fog machines, high-tech lighting, dancing, and multi-piece bands, while other churches do things very simply and without any fuss. We are free to construct our worship—within reason—so long as it glorifies God and has him at its centre and focus. In light of contemporary trends, biblical worship, it must be stressed, involves the people of God as participants. Worship is not a show or a concert.

Now, I could just end things here by pointing you to the Prayer Books in the pew racks in front of you. What does biblical worship look like? It looks like the Book of Common Prayer. It *could* look like something else, but the BCP is the finest example of biblical worship I can think of. Our liturgies have survived virtually unchanged for five-hundred years and continue a liturgical tradition that goes back at least a thousand years before that. It has proved itself. The only reason people started tampering with the Book of Common Prayer was because their theology changed—and not for the better. There's a reason why Lutherans, when they needed a common service in English, borrowed heavily from the Common Prayer tradition. There's a little book titled *The Minister's Handbook*, which is popular with free-church ministers. It's essentially a prayer book for people who don't have the Prayer Book and need to know what to do and say at a wedding or a baptism. It's mostly just excerpts from the Book of Common Prayer. When the United Church drafted its Book of Order, it borrowed heavily from the Book of Common Prayer. Brothers and Sisters, never take our liturgical heritage or the Prayer Book for granted. It is, arguably, the richest treasure of worship ever produced by Christendom. And virtually all of it is from the Bible, either directly quoted or paraphrased in some way.

But I don't want to just defend the Common Prayer tradition, or liturgy in general, this morning. Why has the Book of Common Prayer stood the test of time? Because it brings together the elements of biblical worship. But what are those elements? Well, let's look at our controlling narrative again. Good worship not only tells the story, but involves us in it. Think back to those forty-nine martyrs in Carthage. This is what compelled them to gather together even though it meant death.

So, once again, think back to the beginning. God created human beings to bear his image. That means to serve as his regents in Creation—in this temple that he built for himself. This is why St. Paul writes in Romans that Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. When we rejected our vocation, Creation lost her stewards and the Lord lost his priests. Everything fell apart. But in the midst of the darkness, the Lord called forth Abraham and created a people for himself. He delivered them from slavery in Egypt, he gave them his law, and most importantly, he took up his dwelling in their midst. And as they lived to give him glory and to witness his presence and his mighty deeds, they became a light to the nations, looking forward to a day when nations would come streaming to the temple to know the living God for themselves and to give him the glory he is due. The prophets looked forward to the day when the knowledge of the Lord's glory would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Old Testament Israel gives us models for biblical worship. We see her songs of the Lord's mighty deeds—songs like the Song of Moses or the Psalms. We see her prayers for deliverance—from her earthly enemies and from the sins and the lack of faith that so often compromised her witness—prayers for deliverance made in faith and rooted deeply in a sureness of God's covenant faithfulness. We see her songs of hope, knowing the Lord's past faithfulness, and looking forward to the day when he would not only save Israel, but set all of Creation to rights. But most importantly for us, we see Israel's story reach its climax in Jesus—and in his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. This is *our* exodus. As Israel was delivered from her bondage to Pharoah, so the cross and the empty tomb are our deliverance from sin and death. Baptism is our Red Sea and the Lord's Supper is our Passover, whereby we participate in God's mighty deeds and find our place in his covenant people. And now, like Israel, we sing and we proclaim what he has done to give him glory and to make him known that others will be moved to give him glory too. Everything we do as his people is meant to give him glory—or it should!

Think of Jesus' words in John 15:8, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."

Now, how does that controlling narrative, how does that story shape our worship? First, it means that word and sacrament will be at the centre of our worship. The Bible never tells us directly how frequently we should observe the Lord's Supper, but the implication of what we read in Acts and the Epistles certainly suggests that the first Christians observed it at least every Sunday. The English Reformers, particularly Thomas Cranmer, designed our liturgy around a weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, but people were so used to only participating in the sacrament four times a year that weekly Communion didn't take and Morning Prayer became the staple of weekly worship in most Anglican churches until the Twentieth Century. Whatever the case, biblical worship will include baptisms, whenever they are called for, and the Lord's Supper on some sort of regular schedule. The one thing we can't do is discard them entirely. If we fail to observe the sacraments we disobey Jesus himself and cease to be a church. I think when we realise that the Supper is as an act of covenant remembrance and renewal, it becomes more natural to observe it weekly.

Biblical worship listens to God and tells the story. That means it will include the reading of scripture. Always. Preferably at least a passage from the Old Testament and another from the New—and preferably tied together so that we see the interconnectedness of the old and new covenants and the faithfulness of God is revealed to his glory.

Brothers and Sisters, our calling as God's people is to glorify him and to proclaim his mighty deeds and the good news about Jesus so that the world will give him glory. We can't do that unless we know who he is and what he's done. And that doesn't just go for corporate worship. Scripture ought to be central to our lives in general. We ought to be steeping ourselves in God's word on a daily basis—listening to him—so that we can know him and what he's done. I don't know if it's because we're lazy or if we think that Christian maturity comes by osmosis or just with time, but Brothers and Sisters, if you don't feed on God's word, you will not grow. It's the Spirit who grows us, but he grows us *with the word*. Steeping ourselves in the word during the week is one of the ways we prepare ourselves to gather together on Sundays. One of the trends of contemporary worship is this idea that the service has to start by getting the worshippers in the "right" mood. That's borne in part out of the faulty notion that good worship makes us feel a certain way, but I think the bigger reason for this is that too many of us simply aren't preparing for worship over the six preceding days of the week. We treat worship as a Sunday thing, then we go home and unplug ourselves from God and from his word and from prayer until Sunday comes around again. That's not the kind of life that drove Saturninus and Dativus and their congregation to risk death in order to gather at the Lord's Table.

So the reading of the word will be central. And so will the sermon. Biblical worship will include a sermon that explains and applies the word. There's nothing inherently holier about a longer sermon than a shorter sermon, but good biblical exposition and application takes time and it rarely happens in the ten- or twelve-minute homilies that have become commonplace today. And as much as modern people may think it's the Anglican way, it most definitely is not. I've edited several volumes of sermons by popular Anglican preachers of the past and you'd be hard-pressed to read those sermons out loud in less than an hour. Let me stress that those were *popular* preachers. A few centuries earlier, in the decades following the Reformation, it was common for people to hear a sermon on Sunday morning, go home for lunch, and then return to the church to hear another sermon or two in the afternoon. Puritan preachers were often given hourglasses—as in they actually measure out a full hour—and were told how many turns of the glass they could preach. Because God's people were hungry for his word. Today we've lost that hunger and it's no wonder that the Church in the West is foundering and that we struggle to tell the story anymore. How can we proclaim what we don't know?

The second focal point of our biblical corporate worship is the sacraments—particularly the Lord's Supper. Baptism, when it is done, ought normatively to take place in the corporate gathering, because it is the rite by which we are included in the covenant people. It is our Red Sea by which we pass from bondage in Egypt into life in the presence of the Lord and his people and it's right that those people be there to welcome each new member as he or she rises from the sea. I pray that we would have reason to do that every Sunday someday, but in the meantime we include baptism as necessary. But weekly observing the Lord's Supper, well, it is meet and right so to do.

Word and sacrament complement each other. Different churches and different preachers will take different approaches to how we read scripture. We use a lectionary. Others may read through whole books of the Bible systematically week by week. However we do it, though, our reading of the word will range over all sort of subjects and genres and not everything we'll read is about the gospel—at least not directly. The focus of the readings and the sermons will cover all sorts of different subjects—and that's good. But the Lord's Supper (and baptism, when the occasion arises) grounds us week in and week out in the death and

resurrection of Jesus and reminds us what he's done for us and who he has made us. As the annual observance of the Passover was for each generation in Israel a new participation in the events by which the Lord had made them his people, so each observance of the Lord Supper is for us a new participation in the events by which Jesus has delivered us from sin and death. And notice that there's both a vertical and a horizontal element to that. When we come to the Table we are reminded that we belong to God through Jesus, that he has redeemed us and made us his own, but it also reminds us of the horizontal—that he has made us a part of this covenant people called the Church and that we are brothers and sisters in Jesus, and that we belong to each other, that we are one body. At the Table God's love is poured down on us, but then it also flows out horizontally from each of us to the others.

The scripture lessons and the sermon can't cover these fundamental truths every single Sunday, but we are reminded and confronted by them every single time we come to the Lord's Table. Our culture today is almost entirely oriented on the individual and that his infected Christian thinking and the Church. We have no trouble remembering the vertical—me and God—but we too often downplay or forget altogether the horizontal—the fact that even as God saves us individually, in doing so he makes us part of a people who cannot be effective in our mission and who cannot ultimately be healthy if we do not live this new life together as a family. Again, this is a powerful corrective to modern error. Too much of contemporary worship is people coming together to sort of have their individual worship experiences in a group setting. Worship has become a performance. The lights are turned down so we can't see each other—we just focus on the "leaders" at the front. The band—or in some places the choir or the organ—is so loud that you can't hear yourself sing, let alone the person next to you. A friend of mine who advocates that kind of worship tells me that it's an "immersive" model in contrast to a "participatory" one and that it's just how our culture has gone. In folk cultures everyone is involved in music, but in ours, music has largely been relegated to professionals. The rest of us just sit and listen. Even at home, we put on our headphones, close our eyes, tune everything else out, and immerse ourselves in the performance. Brothers and Sisters, that may be the way our culture has gone, but the Church cannot go there. That "immersive" model of worship is incompatible with biblical worship in which we all participate. Worship is not a concert or a show for the worshiper to passively receive. Worship is the service of God's people to him. The lights should be on so we can see each other. And the accompaniment should be just that: accompaniment. It shouldn't drown out our voices, because the most important thing about congregational singing is that it's just that: congregational singing—our voices raised together as one to give God the glory he is due.

I think if we get these two things right in our worship—word and sacrament—we will get the story right and that's really what it's all about. As we hear his word, God draws us in with the story. In Baptism and the Lord's Supper he incorporates us into the story and gives us a place in it. And now equipped by word and Spirit, he sends us out to tell the story ourselves so that others will be drawn in. There are other essential parts to worship—we sing and we pray, we confess our sins and receive assurance of pardon, we bring our tithes and offerings—but they revolve around the word and sacrament that stand in the middle. They are our response to the story, to what God in Jesus has done for us and for the world. Each of those parts of our worship could merit a whole sermon on its own, but I just want to close with one example, again taken from our Common Prayer tradition, and that's the *Gloria*.

When the Prayer Book was first written in 1549—and for a long time thereafter—there were no hymns. Much of the liturgy itself was sung. The Psalms were sung. But there was *one* hymn included in the liturgy for the Lord's Supper and Thomas Cranmer made sure that it stood at the end of the service, because the hymns we sing in worship are essentially response to what God has said and done in word and sacrament. In the service we hear his word and he renews his covenant with us at the Table, and then we sing in response, "Glory to God in the highest". This is what he created us to do. When Jesus gave his life on the cross and rose from the grave, it was to create a people, full of God's own Spirit, who will give him glory. And, Brothers and Sisters, we give him glory—it starts here on Sunday, but ought to carry on in our whole lives the rest of the week—we give him glory that one day all the nations will give him glory too.

Let's pray: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleans the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.