

Exploring the architecture of community formation

Abstract: There is strong biblical warrant for the language of building God's people together (as in Eph 2:19-22, 4:12). Using a missional church model, this paper will explore a four stage process by which God builds his people - both as individual believers grow into church community, but also as the church community as a whole is formed to live missionally. Preachers have a vital role at each part of the four-fold process: initiation, integration, spiritual formation and missional living.

This conference theme has enticed and emboldened me into drawing together some large themes that may at first glance seem unrelated yet, I shall suggest, belong together in the architecture of community formation. The word "architecture" implies coherent design, solid structure, and visible purpose. In this paper I shall first consider four issues that should converge in order to understand God's building process: a biblical picture, the missional church, worship, and the role of preachers as leaders. Second, I shall explore some dynamics of community formation and then, third, relate them to a four-fold process.

A biblical picture

The picture of the church as God's building has especial significance for community formation (1 Cor. 3:9, 16 Eph. 2:19-22, and 1 Peter 2:6, 7 with powerful building resonance in Eph. 4:12-19). This metaphor emphasizes the *likeness* of believers – like "living stones" (1 Pet. 2:9). Instead of stressing different individual gifts (as in the "body" of 1 Cor. 12:14-26), the building picture expresses how believers all have the *same* function – to be held together in God's construction work. God is both the *Designer* and *Builder* (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:22, 3:10), ensuring *structural unity* through Jesus Christ, the "chief cornerstone... in him the whole building is joined together" (Eph 2:20). As work in *progress* "the whole building rises" (present tense Eph 2:21), and its development requires construction *skill*. Interestingly, a technical building term used for "joined together"- *synarmologoumene* – is found only in Eph. 2:21 and 4.16. Its meaning "embraces the complicated process of masonry by which stones are fitted together."¹ (Wood, 1978, p.42). God builds his church not by haphazard arrangement but skilful, complex construction, as "living stones" are aligned *together* (Eph. 2:19, 20).integrated with the cornerstone, inhabited by the Spirit, for cosmic purposes.

Clearly, this biblical picture describes community formation - believers formed together within God's design, dependent on his direction and strength for continued usefulness. Its internal structure – as God's household with the Holy Spirit living within – requires strong unity. No wonder God's passion for unity and peace is evident throughout the New Testament (as in John 17:20, 21; Eph 2: 14: 4: 3, 4). Yet the whole building has the external visible purpose of witnessing to the world (Matt 5:14-16), as well as cosmic powers (Eph 3:10).

Missional church

Though often over-used and misunderstood, this term “missional church” properly frames discussion of community formation. Craig Van Gelder usefully contrasts the corporate church with the missional church – the *doing* church or the *being* church.² He bases this distinction on the ways that these two churches view their own purpose. On one hand, the corporate church, embedded in the European version of Constantinian Christendom, understands itself to exist “as an organization to accomplish something, normally *on behalf of God in the world.*” On the face of it, a doing church sounds attractive. Wouldn’t we prefer to belong to a doing church rather than a non-doing church!

However, on the other hand, another church model has arisen. Because of convergence in missiological circles around a mission theology related to the *Missio Dei* and the Kingdom of God, the missional church’s self understanding is: “that it is created by the Spirit as a called and sent community to participate fully in God’s mission in the world.”³ (Van Gelder, p.246). Instead of the *doing* church that focuses on projects and programs that may emphasize human vision and energy, the *being* church sees the world as the horizon. Its parameters depend less on themselves and more on God’s redemptive reign in Christ and empowering by the Holy Spirit. Such an understanding of church emphasizes how God is forming his new people to join in his triune mission. “God is about a big purpose in and for the whole of creation... a missional church is a community of God’s people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God’s missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ.”⁴

Missional theology challenges community formation to build missionary communities that live in (stark) contrast with surrounding culture. “A chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light...abstain from sinful desires. Live such good lives among the pagans that...they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Peter 2: 9-12). Such a notion of community is profoundly counter-cultural. Indeed, modernity’s individualistic creed mocks such a possibility, preferring to sponsor the corporate church, encouraging pious consumerism by which believers downgrade to attendees - choosing church according to style, oblivious to responsibility for brothers, sisters and neighbors. Numbers matter more than building community. “We are more impressed by a church of 4000 people who have no clue about God’s character and His expectations than by a church of 100 deeply committed saints who are serving humankind in quiet but significant ways.”⁵

Missional theology resonates powerfully with the biblical picture of God building his people, and underlines the need for developing missional practices that enable people to be formed together, as we shall see shortly.

Worship

Worship is the most appropriate biblical way of summing up the process by which God builds his people for his missional purpose is by worship. While some make worship too

small, viewing it as services, or even more narrowly as music within those services, Scripture claims worship is God's most significant way of building his community of living stones. Living stones are built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God (1 Pet. 2: 5). Receiving God's mercy has one supreme outcome - "offering bodies as living sacrifices." (Rom. 12:1-2). "Worship is the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God, ascribing all honor and worth to their Creator God precisely because he is worthy, delightfully so."⁶ "Worship is all of us for all of God."⁷

The word "worship" has to be rescued from special interest groups who call music leaders "worship leaders" and assume that worship is mostly singing and liturgy. Worship is God's greatest idea and our highest activity. It claims center stage and every other position as well. Worship involves *prostration* - to bow self down (*shachah* in Old Testament (Ps. 96:6), and *proskuneo* in New Testament - literally "kiss the hand toward" (John 4:23, Hebrews 9:15). But it also requires service - *abad* in the Old Testament means to labor and to serve - and in the New Testament, *latreuo* refers to a state of servitude. Worshippers are not just knocked down prostrate before God's greatness, but also set up on their feet to serve him (Acts 24:14, Rom 12:1, 2). Awe, mystery, wonder, joy, are joined with offering and service. As Jesus makes clear, true worship of God is both adoring and obedient love to God, but also loving service of one's neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39).

Christian worship is as inclusive as total Christian living in response to God. Worship is not something humans do on the way to something more important. It's the reason why we are alive in the first place. Worship embraces all that we are and all that we have-given by God, and returning to him in praise and by worshipful living. It is the foundational, purpose-driven, *integrator* holding everything else together, *everything* that believers think and do. "The urgent, indeed troubling, message of Scripture is that everything that matters is at stake in worship."⁸

Worship's role in community formation is essential. "Worship both forms and expresses the faith-experience of the community."⁹ James B. Torrance's book title rightly sums up the critical role of Trinitarian theology in such formation: *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*. Combining worship with mission, he sees them as "the gift of participating through the Holy Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father and the Son's mission from the Father to the world."¹⁰ Through Christ's mediating (Heb. 3:1), the church's worship and mission participate in fellowship within the "community" of God's three persons.

By worship, believers are joined together in God's building project in order to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2:9). By praising God, worship "does God's story,"¹¹ developing God's people in two different ways. On one hand, the "inner journey" of faith-experience strengthens togetherness *within* community while, on the other hand, an "outer journey" also expresses worship through missional living. "Worship turns out to be the dangerous act of waking up to God and to the purposes of God in the world, and then living lives that actually show it"¹²

Role of preachers in community formation

When worship is defined more fully by its throw-down, throw-out, love-God, love-neighbor dimensions, it has major repercussions for preaching. Worship is not a sideline but the mainline; not a side show but the main show. Preachers need to see that worship becomes the primary description of preaching itself, and worship with preaching reaches far beyond organizing weekly services into big-picture living of a new community being built for God's glory (1 Pet. 2: 9, 10). Instead of short-shelf life worship services with few communal expectations, as hearers come and go without growing together, big picture worship forms congregations into communities full of love and service for the lost world around them. Unsurprisingly several writers on worship have emphasized this (such as Bolsinger, Dawn, Torrance and Wilson).¹³ It is time for preachers to wake up as worshipers to their vital role in community formation.

I argued in *360degree leadership* that the preachers' role necessarily involves leadership because of the nature of God's transformative word.¹⁴ Since Scripture reveals God's will and vision, preachers are inevitably involved with leadership outcomes whenever they preach. Early church leaders - "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11-13) - are all involved with communicating God's word in order "to prepare God's people for works of service (*diakonia*) so that the body of Christ may be built up...and become mature." However, preaching can help or hinder such building and maturing work.

I lamented "thin-blooded preaching" that hinders building Christ's body. Because of individualistic focus, lack of Trinitarian theology and low commitment to missional church, such preaching fails to form community. In contrast I urged "full-blooded" preachers to seize leadership responsibilities, to proclaim with community focus, Trinitarian theology and high missional commitment, by exegesis that discerns and applies creative tension within biblical texts to community. With leadership skills, such as team-building and enabling change-process, such preaching moves beyond delivering cerebral information or moralizing for individuals into church building. Only by intentional preparation and dependence on the Holy Spirit can preaching lead community formation, urging reconciliation, unity, and mission, with realism about conflict, forgiveness, peace-making, and service. As masons skillfully join together masonry blocks (Eph 2:20), so preachers enable God's building work. By his grace they encourage living stones to fit together, fighting ever-present dangers of disunity and conflict with diligence and prayer and, always, focused on praising God by worship.

Preachers are therefore key persons for integrating these four basic issues into healthy convergence, bringing together God's biblical picture of building his people, with commitment to the missional church, within big picture of worship that involves the totality of our responses together to God. Preachers have a vital role in developing God's construction project.

Dynamics of Community Formation

The process of structuring living stones is complex. Bonding believers together in Christ, empowered by the Spirit, as a royal priesthood declaring the praises of God and living good lives among neighbors (1 Pet. 2.9,12), involves formation that develops in different

directions by contrasting means. Community formation occurs both inwardly and outwardly, personally and corporately, by both verbal and non-verbal means working explicitly and implicitly.

Formation occurs both *inwardly* and *outwardly*. The inward journey builds fellowship (*koinonia*) by gathered worship with praise, prayer, offering, hearing God's word, and communing around the Lord's Table. It grows collective awareness of brothers and sisters, expressing love to God and to one another, not only "loving with words and tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3: 18). Ever since the first Christians' dazzling commitment (Acts 2: 42-27), true community life has four hall-marks. It is devoted to - teaching, *koinonia*, the breaking of bread and prayer. These continue as foundational community-building elements of gathered worship.

However, this inner building of God's people combines with an outer purpose of living for God in his world. The gathered church is a city on a hill, drawing people together. Yet it is also a light that shines before the world (Matt. 5:14, 15) impacting those around, gathered not for its own sake but to be scattered like salt (Matt. 5:13). "Salt is often preached of as a preservative. But salt is also an agent of change. For instance, spread it on meat and it will change the meat's flavor, color, texture, and shelf-life...salt is an aggressive instrument of transformation."¹⁵ So, the inner journey of developing fellowship belongs with the grand purpose of maturing a community for "works of service" (Eph 4: 12).

These two worship movements are as clearly connected as God's commands to love him with all of ourselves, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt 22:37, 38). Of course, the inner journey seems "safer" than the outer. Building fellowship in love sounds more agreeable than serving others in love. Indeed, Labberton calls the latter "dangerous" because: "worship names what matters most; the way human beings are created to reflect God's glory by embodying God's character in lives that seek righteousness and do justice."¹⁶ This gathering/scattering dynamic marks missional worshippers, centripetally gathered into public worship, yet centrifugally distributed to impact the world like salt.

Further, community formation needs to develop in both *personal* and *corporate* directions. On one hand, *individuals* need to be integrated into community and learn what it means to grow with others into Christ. Yet, on the other hand, the *whole community* of nurtured people needs to live out God's mission. Worship literature has tended to focus on the first aspect of integrating individuals into community, especially emphasizing the Lord Supper's formational role. For example, Robert Webber commends a four-stage process, using terms from early church practice, first described by Hippolytus – a third century Christian leader in Rome. Four stages denote a disciple's spiritual formation. At stage one, the *seeker* in Christian inquiry enters through a rite of welcome into a process leading to conversion. Stage two, prepares the *hearer* in discipleship through the rite of enrollment with a commitment to become baptized. Stage three, the *kneeler*, moves towards baptism and full membership in the church. Stage 4, the *faithful* actively participates in the church.¹⁷

However, a parallel, though more difficult process, needs to be learned. Even as believers are nurtured to belong within the church community, the community as a whole is learning to live differently for God in the world. In contrast with narcissistic, self-pleasing goals of society, God seeks people who are corporately focused on him in praise, and who are collectively motivated for mission. So, for example, believers not only learn to practice hospitality to one another around the Lord's Table in gathered worship, but also practice hospitality to the strangers and needy in their surrounding community.

Additionally, it should be noted that community formation occurs through both *verbal* and *non-verbal* communication. Preachers concentrate on the former, rightly claiming God's word effects transformation inwardly, outwardly, personally and collectively (Rom 10: 14, 15; 2 Cor 5:20). Dawn emphasizes how preachers have a critical role in building community: by constant use of the plural *we*; by emphasizing that faith is not for personal use only but a gift for community into which the church grows; by instruction about community implications of foundational doctrines such as creation in the image of God and its significance for all inter-relationships; and, by specific instructions. "For being hospitable, for carrying the corporate prayers into daily life, for each adult to participate more in the spiritual nurturing of the congregation's children, for more outreach to the neighbors."¹⁸ This list lengthens dramatically, when repercussions from issues in this paper add to the preacher's responsibility to teach about worship itself.

But words form only part of communication. Don Saliers suggests that congregations must learn "the *hidden* languages of worship – time, space, sound and silence, the visible, and the bodily gestures belonging to narratives of creation, redemption, and consummation."¹⁹ *Time* involves cycles of days, weeks and years, living between Sundays, through the Christian year to grow mature habits of identity. *Space* relates to places of worship, and what we hear and see within them. *Sound and silence* are both critical – "music and silence must surround the reading and hearing of the Church's corporate memories contained in the Scriptures."²⁰ Music is especially important for reinforcing the verbal. Indeed, Luther claimed that Christians learned their theology through hymns. *Visual Gesture and Movement* – focuses on Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but also includes art, drama, poetry, even dance.

Words and actions combine to shape community spirituality in profound ways. "At its best, Christian worship presents a vision of life created, sustained, redeemed and held in the mystery of grace. What we do together in acknowledging God "schools" us in way of seeing the world and of being in it."²¹ And such "schooling" towards new identity requires remembrance at its center. "Our deepest emotions are intimately linked with how we remember ...without the capacity to remember, we lack a sense of narrative about our lives and our world"²² For Christians, "remembering" focuses on the story of creation, covenant, salvation in Christ, and consummation of God's kingdom. By "remembering" the Christian story in which we belong, we not only re-appropriate God's story as present gift - "This do in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11) - but grow together as God's people on his journey. Community identity is shaped by ever renewing community memory.

Such verbal and nonverbal communication works both *explicitly* and *implicitly*. Explicit worship practices include: preaching, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and for some - foot-washing²³ Less obviously, *implicit* formation occurs through worship's repetitive nature, reinforcing priorities, patterns and emphases over time. As believers worship together over the long haul so their understanding of God and his church are shaped. Saliers describes how different capacities develop that are "essential to true humanity." By *recalling and retelling* the story that gives human identity, corporate *praise and thanks* to God expresses profound gratitude and shapes a grateful people. "A life devoid of gratitude becomes incapable of receiving gifts and eventually receiving gifts." *Confession* before God, also encounters truth about ourselves that would not otherwise be known. *Intercession* that prays for the world and its suffering also identifies with the needs of others, forcing issues of ethics and justice onto the agenda. By such worship people are being changed. "In recalling who God is and who we are, we identify the world to itself as what it yet shall be under the reign of God."²⁴

Four Stages of Community Formation

With broad brushstrokes, I now attempt to explore the architecture of community formation by integrating these different issues. Four stages express progression from initiation, through integration into spiritual formation and missional living. Inevitably, such divisions oversimplify, and yet they reveal a necessary process by which living stones are built together into maturing construction. At each stage, believers are influenced by both personal and community formation (middle two columns). The last column, "worshipful preaching" describes necessary qualities for preachers who are committed to working through converging implications of God's building, missional theology, and big-picture worship.

God builds his church intentionally. Formation of individuals and community doesn't just happen! People do not learn the character of togetherness without long-term shaping as God's community by his Spirit, by developing through different stages.

Stages	Personal Formation	Community formation	Worshipful preaching
4. Missional Living	Counter-cultural living	Responsibility to others in missionary living 1 Pet. 2: 9-12 Forgiveness and reconciliation, Justice & social action, Formation of households as communities of faith, Hospitality, Citizenship, Reverence for Creation.	Courage, prophetic preaching, moral discernment
3. Spiritual formation.	Personal Character in attitude and deed Preferences. Living in the story	Godly character in holiness, love, unity. Coping with conflict eg worship wars. Eph. 4: 11-13	Ensuring “schooling”, Intentional leadership through preaching.
2. Integration Expressing acts of worship as Christ’s body	Learning a new vocabulary – triune God, “we,”	Corporate worship – The Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34)	God is center, meeting him corporately.
1. Initiation into body of Christ with Trinitarian participation.	Learning a new theology. Jesus is Lord, to the glory of the Father, by the Holy Spirit.	Baptism – corporate responsibility, public witness (Rom 6:1-14, <i>en Christo</i> verses 3,11)	Trinitarian and baptismal theology, wonder, awe, celebration. Festivity.

Fig. 1. Four stages of worship formation

Stage 1

At the beginning new believers are faced with a fundamental either/or. Either they will enter church seeing conversion and baptism as personal responses to Jesus *without* community implications. Deeming Christian faith to be primarily individualistic, their church choosing and going depends on personal preference, (and convenience). Or, they will view conversion and baptism as personal responses to Jesus that, from the outset, integrate them into belonging to Jesus as Lord, within the Trinity, and to joining his body - the church. Not only should they learn of the Trinity, but how worship is “the gift of participating through the Holy Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father and the Son’s mission from the Father to the world.”²⁵ Whether within infant or believers’ baptism traditions, the act of baptism marks the public beginning not only of testimony to faith in Christ, but also of belonging to his body. It involves initiation into new community.

Some in the believers’ baptism tradition, (including myself), stress that baptism *into* Christ Jesus means being “united with him,” baptized into his death and resurrection

(Rom. 6: 1-7). *En Christo* (in Christ) becomes powerful short-hand for believers incorporated into the body of Christ. Solitary independence is therefore not an option, for baptism necessarily means belonging with others. Explicitly it begins nurture of individuals into community - it is God's idea of how new Christian life begins.

For individual believers this means learning new ways of speaking about Jesus as Lord, to the glory of the Father, by the Holy Spirit. Such Trinitarian theology should open up to the wonder of God's triune community relationships now shared in worship. And for the wider community, each act of baptism is celebrated as corporate responsibility for new believers as they join the church.

Preachers have great teaching responsibility to ensure that new believers understand how they belong to Jesus, within the Trinity and within his body, so that baptism marks initiation into church community. Theology matters! But, they also should ensure that awe, wonder, joy and celebration mark the event as newcomers, overwhelmed by amazing grace, are welcomed into Christ's body. Preachers bear huge responsibility in proclaiming baptism's significance, and enabling of the whole church community to enact its joy and wonder with thoughtful theology. Dawn emphasizes how a goal of preaching is to train listeners to be theologians.²⁶ (Dawn, 1995, 238).

This challenges much current practice where loose connections abound between conversion and discipleship, baptism and church membership, private testimony ("Jesus and me") and new relationships ("Jesus and us"). Robert Webber criticizes much public worship for its lack of gospel joy and, especially at this initiation stage, festivity should be enthusiastically prepared for and experienced.²⁷ How believers begin their public journey with Christ really matters.

Let me illustrate Stage 1 from my pastoral experience in Cambridge. Concerned that baptism had lost some significance as initiation into the church, a process was introduced by which each candidate preparing for baptism was mentored by an older Christian, who helped prepare them for public witness. Working in pairs through a series of bible studies together over many weeks, they learned both of the theological significance of their act of baptism, as well as the spiritual formation that lay ahead as they belonged *en Christo*. On the well-publicized day of baptism, the whole act of gathered worship centered upon baptism in testimony, preached word and public witness. A great day for evangelism, the baptisms frequently led to others coming forward in repentance and faith. But, it was stressed how baptism not only marked candidates' declaration of faith and repentance before Christ and his people, but also the beginning of new lives in the church community. After coming up out of the baptismal pool, they later returned for a service of the Lord's Supper. Before receiving bread and wine, they were received into the church by the laying on of hands, and commissioned as co-ministers in their new community, sharing in its life and mission, "like living stones ...being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:5). By intentionally linking baptism with church membership, and personal witness with discipleship, no-one could escape the community implications of Christian faith.

Stage Two

As new believers grow into Christ's new community, so they learn to express worship together as members of Christ's body. In particular, let's focus on three aspects - praise, prayer and participating in the Lord's Supper. Each of these requires a three-fold response from believers: that they center on God, they employ biblical testimony and they use plural language.

First, learning to praise is not easy. Adoration and thanks that truly center on the triune God, (rather than on ourselves), require immense discipline. All too often, words offered in worship services fail to focus on God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - his attributes and his work. "We go to worship to praise and thank God for what *he* has done, is doing and will do. God's work in Christ is the focus of worship"²⁸ However, too often words center on emotions of the present. Instead of addressing God in his holiness, praise is marooned in a congregation's "feelings" towards God.

Praise also needs to include *biblical* testimony to God's worthiness. Psalms provide one obvious resource for praise (as well as lament and repentance for confession), but other Scripture texts provide shape and content for more adequate adoration and thanks.

Further, praise requires a new plural vocabulary - what some have called "we-ness." The language of togetherness is writ large in the New Testament - "you" plural dominates. While it is permissible to use the first person singular "I" in corporate worship, learning to say "we" is essential for community formation. With plural language comes sensitivity to others, and openness to the Holy Spirit's power to unite (Eph 4:3). Living stones join together by learning to express togetherness.

Second, learning to pray together is not easy. During worship services, several kinds of prayer may be offered, including adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition and blessing. The need to center on God is vital for true praise (as we have seen), but it is also particularly important for confession, so that worshipers articulate their need before God. Omitting confession in worship severely impacts a community's spiritual perspective on sin and grace. And again, Scripture provides rich resources for congregational prayer.

Plural language is essential in prayer, particularly for corporate intercession and petition. Bluntly, Saliers challenges: "Our impoverished experience of common prayer for the world is directly traceable to our inability to know and to minister to others in his name."²⁹ But when a community learns to share in prayer for others, it grows in community awareness for both its "inner" and "outer" journeys.

Third, believers need to learn the critical place of the Lord's Supper for community formation. Commanded as a repeatable act by Jesus, it early became a focal point of worship (Acts 2:34) and continues to have great consequence as Christ's chosen way for believers *together* to encounter him in communion. Ironically, its essential corporate nature can be missed by individualistic approaches centering on "Jesus and me." Rather, as several writers on worship stress, its fourfold action emphasizes how Christ continually forms community: *take* challenges participants to offer themselves as living

sacrifices to God; *bless* speaks of responsibility to others – blessed to be a blessing; *break* emphasizes how believers should be given for others; *share* – stresses the mutual life of Christ’s community.

James Torrance claims “perhaps we are never more truly human than at the Lord’s table when Christ draws us into his life of communion.”³⁰ When Tod Bolsinger states: “It takes a Church to raise a Christian – how the community of God transforms lives” he argues that God in three persons, creates us in his image not only as humans to be persons in relationship, but also as believers to participate in his community life – especially around the Lord’s Table.³¹ The Lord’s Supper remains God’s primary way of focusing community formation, packed with theological significance. David Buttrick lists some of its meanings by theological short-hand: Passover, Covenant, Mount Zion, Sinners, Cana, 5000, Last Supper, Resurrection meals, Kingdom Parables. “The list suggests that we are not dealing with the story of Israel or stories of Jesus alone, but with a come-together Story of God-with-us. Eucharist gathers the time and space of God-with-us, is crammed with the whole import of the *whole* Gospel.”³²

Questions about its frequency will remain open, as believers argue whether it is emphasized better by less or more regular practice. But it is essential that preachers perceive it to be Christ’s appointed method of ensuring togetherness with redeemed brothers and sisters. Taking bread (one loaf), and sharing the cup of the covenant reinforces community in profound ways.

In praise, prayer and the Lord’s Supper the preacher’s role in community formation is to keep focus on God at the center, on Scripture that shapes content and language, and on the corporate dimensions of community development especially centered on the Lord’s Supper.

Stage 3

This stage emphasizes the development of character both for individuals and community. Personal formation develops not only a new language of “we-ness,” but should evidence a maturing of attitude and deed, expressed by fruit of the Spirit – “by their fruit shall you know them” (Matt 7:20; Gal. 5:22). Surrounded by loving supportive brothers and sisters it should become easier to be loving and supportive persons. Instead of preferences based on personal likes or dislikes, believers grow in awareness of what is best for the whole community. Personal “stories” are placed within the larger picture of belonging within God’s story from creation to consummation.

While individuals are expected to grow in Christlikeness, so also the whole community should be maturing in its expression of holiness, love and unity. At this point I raise the issue of music in worship. Perhaps nothing reveals the state of community maturity more than its response to music. The role of music in worship has been implicit through stages 1 and 2 for expressing praise. “The Christian community sings...Singing is the highest form of human expression...The praise of God which finds its concrete culmination in the singing of the community is one of the indispensable basic forms of the ministry of the community.”³³ But music goes deeply into the human psyche, powerfully expressing

personal emotion. Unsurprisingly, therefore, music choices have become divisive in many churches. While newer churches likely accept contemporary music as part of its identity, many older churches have experienced considerable tension over music. Choosing community music has become a litmus paper test for maturity in Christ.

Scripture emphasizes three key issues about music. First, that it should *please God*. Psalm 96:1: “Sing to the Lord a new song” commands singing that is directed “to the Lord” - an offering for God’s sake. Harold Best also notes that while “a new song” speaks of a newness arising out of vital faith, it also suggests that we should sing *newly*. “We can sing a truly new song only once, and thereafter we repeat it...singing a song newly means that we must sing the thousandth repetition *as if for the first time*.”³⁴ Pleasing God is primary.

Second, *words matter*. Col.3:16 (also Eph 5:19) envisage different types of singing: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, to God.” However, while encouraging variety, the word of Christ that teaches and admonishes (a task that seems very like preaching), necessarily precedes singing. God’s word initiates responses in music.

Third, *tension is inevitable*. Tension from music seems evident in 1 Cor. 14:15, 16. Is there fear that “singing praises with the spirit” might preclude singing praise with the mind? Is pagan influence already infiltrating through music? Because of music’s immense emotional power, is the early church facing possibilities that thoughtful worship is being seduced by secular music styles? Certainly, church history reveals much conflict over worship.

Sadly, self-pleasing music (traditional or contemporary) often dictates who will be drawn together, and who will be excluded. Marva Dawn is controversially associated with the charge that splitting congregations up by music choices reveals spiritual immaturity.³⁵ But how much “give and take” *is* necessary to include brothers and sisters? Many have called for sensitivity in dealing with worship divisions indicating that it is an issue of spiritual formation.

For example, Cornelius Plantinga and Sue Rozeboom suggest how divine relationships within the Trinity “almost say that the persons within God show each other divine *hospitality*...early Christians called this interchange *perichoresis*” - the mutual indwelling of God’s three persons.³⁶ Intriguingly they continue: “Perhaps we could say that hospitality thrives within the triune life of God and then spreads wonderfully to the creatures of God. The one who spreads it is a mediator, a person who ‘works in the middle’” So, leaders responsible for worship must learn to “speak hospitably” making room for others, speaking of others’ worship styles respectfully as they “encourage a congregation’s awareness that it is surrounded by the invisible cloud of witnesses that gather with us in worship.”³⁷ To grow into the community Jesus Christ died for, with all barriers down (Gal. 3:28), requires generosity towards others.

Some argue for “blended worship” as a middle way; others ridicule this as compromise which fails to recognize how contemporary music is growing churches. However, no one should doubt that the primary purpose of worship is to offer lives to God, with music needing to serve that purpose and not obscure it. Harold Best, a keen eclectic musician warns that music has grown too important. While welcoming a wide range of music he pleads: “For Jesus Christ’s sake, let’s get music back where it belongs – as a lispig sign and not a glittering cause, as the response to a commandment and not just a set of tools for influencing people.”³⁸ Gary Parrett argues that all churches should have one foundational text as they approach community worship in the call for humility (Phil. 2:1-5).³⁹ Preachers, as they help “school” congregations, have responsibility to ensure that music choices do not dominate and (unwittingly) destroy possibilities of unity for the body of Christ.

Stage 4

The challenge of missional living is positioned towards the end of the formation progression, but this placement is inevitably artificial. For, even while stages 1 to 3 focus mainly on the inner journey of building communities of unity and love, there should be developing awareness of the outer journey - to become a community that contrasts with, and impacts, surrounding culture (1 Pet 2:9-12). This is the most difficult aspect of community formation because, in so many ways (often subtle), churches accommodate to culture’s individualistic consumer mentality. Researching North American Christianity, David Kinnaman summed up the overall response by the devastating book title “Unchristian,” because it “reflects outsiders’ most common reaction...Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind.” Rather, they come across as, among other aspects, hypocritical and insincere, concerned only with getting others saved.⁴⁰

Scripture’s picture of the worshiping church that belongs within the vast purposeful sweep of living out God’s purpose and wisdom before the world (Eph 3:10) is a bold ideal - “the church’s witness bearing is testimony not to its own life but *to God’s grace in its life*.”⁴¹ But to show evidence of such formation the church needs to develop missional practices that enable it to think and behave in different ways from surrounding culture. A developing literature is increasingly stressing the need to develop such practices.

Two examples will help illustrate the breadth of personal and community formation involved. First, Mildred Minatrea describes nine essential practices of missional churches that include: first, a high threshold for membership – costly discipleship that accepts responsibilities; second, emphasis on being real not real religious in authentic community; third, teaching to obey rather than to know, by practicing what is taught. Minatrea calls for intentional community building that moves beyond maintenance to missional mode, describing the outcome as community life that is “shaped by God’s heart.”⁴² Though he downplays the preacher’s role, the importance of preaching for expounding and leading these practices seems assumed throughout the process.

Second, from a preacher’s perspective, David Schlafer and Timothy Sedgwick, a homiletician and ethicist, identify six distinct practices that Christians should be developing as “clear alternatives to those that are prevailing or taken for granted.” They

describe them as “lenses” by which a community gains moral discernment. These six lenses are: prayer and worship; forgiveness and reconciliation; formation of households as communities of faith; hospitality as the embrace of the stranger and those in need; citizenship and political responsibility; reverence for creation. Together they constitute the character of ethical Christian life. Within the list they consider the practice of Christian householding as the “root metaphor for speaking of the Christian life. The church is after all, “the household of God”(1Tim 3:15) not as a separate household but as the gathering together of particular households in common practice and life signed and celebrated most fully in Eucharist/Holy Communion.... The Epistles particularly evidence the distinctive way of life that Christians sought in response to Christ.”⁴³ I have inserted their list within the diagram as indicators of the kind of practices that help shape personal and community formation, with necessary qualities of courage in prophetic preaching,⁴⁴ and moral discernment.

I began with the evocative New Testament metaphor of God building his people. Building well, as opposed to foolishly (Matthew 7:26), involves well-conceived purpose, creativity and skill in design, strong durable materials, excellence in construction, and confirmed outcomes. God seeks to build his people in the same way. He is architect of purpose, first promised in Matt. 16:18 to Peter: “And on this rock I will build my church.” Conceived from the beginning as integral to the mission of Jesus Christ with cosmic dimensions (Col. 1:18; Eph. 3:10) God’s project has alpha and omega range.

Churches that see afresh the possibilities of being built as God’s communities sound and look different. They contrast strikingly with much that sadly marks current church practice. Instead of individuals judging worship by whether it helped them or not, leaving church with little sense of belonging to the people of God, or sharing his mission for the world, they dare to act as chosen people, and holy nation. Rather than services of worship becoming personally oriented, plagued by “worship wars” as music preferences battle for supremacy, they work hard to include others in “royal priesthood.” Instead of being criticized by culture as unchristian, they live such good lives that others see “good deeds and glorify God” (1 Peter 2:12). Rather than giving out invitations: “You must come to our church – you’ll love the music,” “I really want you to hear our pastor,” “We’ve got a great program for youth.” Now, they say: “Come and meet God with my Christian family.” “Come, you’ll want to belong on our mission together.”

Notes

¹ A. Skevington Wood in Frank. E. Graebelein ed. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 11 (London: Pickering and Inglis Ltd. 1978), 42.

² Craig Van Gelder, “From Corporate Church to Missional Church: The Challenge Facing Congregations Today.” *Review and Expositor* Vol 101, 3, 2004, 425-449.

³ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader – Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), xv.

⁵ George Barna, quoted in Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 18.

⁶ Donald Carson, ed. *Worship by the Book*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 26.

⁷ Thomas Troeger, *Preaching and Worship*, (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 21.

⁸ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship – Living God’s Call to Justice*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 13.

⁹ Don E. Saliers, *Worship and Spirituality*, (Akron: OSL Publications, 1996), 2.

¹⁰ James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 9.

¹¹ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship- Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 29-40.

¹² Labberton, 13.

¹³ These books are referenced elsewhere in these endnotes.

¹⁴ Michael J. Quicke, *360degree Leadership – preaching to transform congregations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

¹⁵ George Barna, *A Fish Out of Water*, (Nashville: Integrity, 2002), xxv.

¹⁶ Labberton, 13.

¹⁷ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism- Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 24.

¹⁸ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal “Waste of Time – The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 184-5.

¹⁹ Saliers, 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²² *Ibid.*, 14

²³ Jonathan R. Wilson, *Why Church Matters – Worship, Ministry and Mission in Practice*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 112-115.

²⁴ Saliers, 24-26.

²⁵ Torrance, 9.

²⁶ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down; A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 238.

²⁷ Robert E. Webber, *Worship is a Verb – Celebrating God’s Mighty Deeds of Salvation*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2004), 22-38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁹ Saliers, 73.

³⁰ Torrance, 39.

³¹ Tod Bolsinger, *It takes a Church to Raise a Christian – how the Community of God Transforms Lives*, Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004.

³² David C. Buttrick, *A Sketchbook: Preaching and Worship*, Meeting of Academy of Homiletics, Princeton Theological School, 1980, 10.

³³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, IV.3.2 trans. G.W. Bromiley (London: T&T Clark, 1961), 866-867.

³⁴ Harold M Best, *Unceasing Worship – Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 146.

³⁵ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down; A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 175.

³⁶ Cornelius Plantinga Jr and Sue A Roseboom, *Discerning the Spirits – a guide to thinking about Christian Worship Today*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 106.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁸ Best, 151.

³⁹ Gary Parrett, *Worship and Preaching*, *Pulpit Talk* CD, Gordon-Conwell Theological School, Summer, 2004, Vol. 2 No.4.

⁴⁰ David Kinnaman, *UnChristian – What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 15.

⁴¹ Wilson, 11.

⁴² Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by God’s Heart – the Passion and Practices of Missional Churches*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

⁴³ David J. Schlafer and Timothy F. Sedgwick, *Preaching What We Practice. Proclamation and Moral Discernment*, (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2007) 49.

⁴⁴ See Michael J. Quicke, *Prophetic Preaching for a Missional Church* in Michael Parsons ed., *Text and Task*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).