CORNERSTONE
BAPTIST CHURCH ORILLIA

A Theology of Worship

Worship is the response of human beings to who God is and what he has done through the person and work of Christ (Romans 12:1; Hebrews 10:19-25). Worship involves all of who we are as people, and yet it is also common and appropriate to speak of worship in the narrower sense, having to do with those particular things we do in our corporate gatherings. In this brief statement we intend to communicate our understanding of what it means to worship God in this way. We understand corporate worship to be a sacred undertaking of the entire church, under the oversight of biblically qualified elders[1], for the strengthening of the saints and the glory of God among the nations.

1. Worship Under the Authority of Scripture

The Bible is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice, it therefore serves as the normative authority for the doctrine, shape, and tone of gathered worship. This does not require that every element of a service be prescribed in detail in Scripture, but it does require that the substance of worship be regulated by biblical truth and ordered according to sanctified wisdom. In accordance with the Scriptures the church gathers to read the Bible, preach the gospel, delight in Christ, pray in the name of Christ, sing the Word of Christ, confess the faith of Christ, celebrate baptism and partake of the Lord's Supper, offering itself to God as a living sacrifice (Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 4:13; Colossians 3:16; Romans 12:1). In this way, worship is an ordered response to divine initiative. Whatever obscures the voice of God, displaces the gospel, or undermines the edification of the body is to be resisted. Whatever assists the congregation in hearing, believing, and obeying the Word may be carefully considered. Our worship will aspire to be grounded in eternal realities while always seeking ways to be accessible and understandable to our children, friends and neighbours.

2. The Centrality of the Ministry of the Word

The ministry of the word rightly occupies a central place in the worship of the church. The Bible teaches that all truly saved people are filled with the Holy Spirit of God and are thus capable of speaking words that encourage and edify the Body of Christ (Acts 2:17-18). Likewise, all believers are priests and are thus involved in the priestly ministry of worship (1 Peter 2:9). As such the worship of the church, including the ministry of the word, should involve the entire congregation. Any member, male or female, young or old, may read Scripture, pray Scripture, and give testimony as to the personal encouragement and correction received from Scripture, provided they do so in an orderly fashion under the overall leadership of the presiding elders (1 Corinthians 14:29). The preached word is central to the experience of Christian worship because Christ gathers, converts, sanctifies, corrects, and comforts his people through it by the power of

[1] We understand the terms 'pastor', 'elder' and 'overseer' to be largely overlapping. The 'pastor' is an 'elder' and the elders collectively shepherd or 'pastor' the church as 'overseers.' In this document the term 'pastor' may be used to identify the elder tasked with presiding over the gathered worship service and/or delivering the official teaching.

the Holy Spirit (Romans 10:17; John 17:17; 2 Timothy 4:1-2). For that reason, preaching will occupy a place of theological prominence in our corporate worship, as the living ministry of Christ to the flock through his duly appointed shepherds. At the same time, word-centred worship is more than sermon-centred worship. The whole gathering should be saturated with Scripture in its readings, prayers, songs, confessions, and benedictions, so that the entire service becomes an arena of divine address and congregational response (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16-17).

3. Word and Sacrament as Means of Grace

The word of God is the means by which the Holy Spirit builds up the Body of Christ; this applies to the word of God heard and spoken in the various readings, prayers, songs and sermons that constitute a typical service, and it applies to the word of God seen in the administration of the sacraments or ordinances. Both words have legitimacy, provided they are carefully understood. Baptism and the Lord's Supper may be referred to as 'sacraments' in the sense that they are places where God meets us in a special way if we make our approach in faith. They are 'mysteries'[2] in the sense that more than what is perceived by the eye is understood to be happening. It is also appropriate to speak of these things as 'ordinances' in the sense that the church is commanded by Christ to observe these things. They are not optional but required. The sacraments/ordinances are the word made visible: divinely appointed signs through which the promises of the gospel are displayed, confessed, and applied to the gathered church. Baptism is the immersion of the believer in water upon profession of faith, whereby the believer obeys Christ's command and identifies with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 6:3-4). The Lord's Supper is a memorial wherein gathered believers partake of the bread and the cup, proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes; it is also a continuing means for strengthening the faith of the believer (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Baptism is properly conducted by an elder/pastor[3] before the gathered church, as an expression of faith in Christ by the individual, and the Supper is likewise to be administered by the elders in a reverent and pastoral manner, such that Christ is honoured, faith is nourished in the hearts of believers, and the holiness and unity of the church are preserved.

4. Ordered Freedom: Liturgy and Evangelical Flexibility

The Bible does not provide a specific liturgy for the gathered worship of God's people, therefore churches have the freedom to shape their own services, guided by scriptural principles and pastoral wisdom. Because the church is rooted in a tradition[4] that has been faithfully preserved and passed on over the centuries, we may incorporate liturgical elements such as creeds, confessions, historical prayers, and beloved hymns alongside of newer songs, extemporaneous

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[2] The word 'sacrament' is often used to translate the Greek word *mystērion* as referring to something where more than what is perceived is understood to be happening.

[3] Parents or faith mentors are invited to participate as co-officiants.

[4] The word 'tradition' literally means to hand down or to hand over. It means precisely what Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2: "what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." (2 Timothy 2:2 ESV)

prayers, corporate readings and personal testimony. Worship in the church should be ever old and new, and should aspire to speak to people of all ages and generations. It should maintain a proper balance between order and spontaneity. The pastors and elders are to establish the parameters and schedule of worship in such a way that the whole gathered church may speak to God and to one another using the gifts and resources given to them by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18-20; Colossians 3:16-17).

5. Conclusion

Worship is the proper response of human beings to God. It is about acknowledging him as our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. It is about seeing him, and seeing each other, ourselves and the world, through him. Worship is about God, and yet it heals and transforms us. Worship is unto God and yet it involves being with and speaking to one another. Worship is the lifeblood of the church, the fuel of daily faithfulness and the ultimate aim and object of our mission. It is what we were made to do, and what we were saved to do, and it is what we will do in eternity, world without end, for the glory of God and the good of all people; amen.