

A Philosophy of Worship

Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the loving and grateful response of human beings to who God is, and to what God has done through the person and work of Christ (Romans 12:1; Hebrews 10:19-25). Worship therefore involves all of who we are as people, and yet it is appropriate to speak in a more narrow sense about what we do as a group when we gather together on the Lord's Day. How we worship on Sunday should provide fuel and focus for our worship as individuals and families throughout the rest of the week. In this brief statement we intend to communicate the core values and commitments that will govern how we worship the Lord in our sacred assemblies.

1. God-centred

Worship is about orienting ourselves toward the source and centre of all reality. It is about hearing from God and agreeing wholeheartedly with what he says. It is about seeing God, in Scripture and climactically in Christ, and submitting to and delighting in what we see. God is the most important participant in each and every one of our worship services. His approval is the one that will always matter most. While we can never be ignorant of the needs, concerns and cultural contexts of our human participants, we will keep the focus on worshipping in a way that is pleasing and acceptable to God. Our worship will aspire to focus the attention of all those present upon the holiness, goodness, and beauty of Almighty God.

2. Christ-exalting

As fallen human beings we are only able to approach our Holy Creator through the person and work of Christ. The heart of the gospel message is that Jesus came down to lift fallen people up. Therefore, we will boldly approach the throne of God, through the finished work and present intercession of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:22-23). In our times of worship, we will celebrate all of what God has done to redeem us, paying particular attention to the climax of that work in the incarnation, life, teaching, example, substitutionary death, resurrection, ascension and session of Jesus. He will be the hero of the testimonies we share, and it will be his honour and glory we seek above all others.

3. Spirit-empowered

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, we are all given gifts that may be used for the edification of the church (1 Corinthians 12:8-11). Therefore, all that we do as a gathered people must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit, including our services of corporate worship. Worship on the Lord's Day is not intended to showcase the gifts of the few, but to activate, cultivate and deploy the gifts of all. The church is not a kingdom with priests, it is a kingdom of priests and therefore we will emphasize plurality and gift-based ministry in our times of corporate worship.

4. Scripture-based

The Bible is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice, it therefore serves as the normative standard 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. 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 the Holy Spirit (Romans 10:17; John 17:17; 2 Timothy 4:1-2). 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).

5. Elder-discerned

The Bible describes a balance of Spirit-led participation and Spirit-empowered discernment within corporate worship. In 1 Corinthians 14:29 the Apostle Paul says: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said” (1 Corinthians 14:29 ESV). Therefore, we intend for our services to reflect principles of plurality, participation and discernment. We understand the task of discernment to be the responsibility of the elders¹. In Titus 1 the Apostle Paul directed Titus to appoint elders in every town and he said: “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” (Titus 1:9 ESV) As such, we understand that the elders are to take the lead in teaching and also to exercise leadership and discernment over all those who are engaged in this important ministry.

6. Congregationally-engaged

Worship involves speaking to God and speaking to one another, as Colossians 3:16-17 says: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:16-17 ESV). Worship must be acceptable to God and engaging with the entire congregation. To accomplish this goal, we will read Scripture from an accurate, contemporary language translation, we will sing songs that are pitched for participation, we will choose elements that communicate welcome to people of all ages and generations and we will balance a concern for excellence with the desire to develop and include future leaders.

The following appendices spell out a few specific areas in greater detail.

¹ A careful examination of Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5 indicates that the terms ‘elder’, ‘pastor’ and ‘overseer’ were understood as substantially synonymous in the early church and they will be used in that way throughout this document.

Appendix 1: On the Ordinances/Sacrament

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 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.

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/pastor³ 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.

Appendix 2: 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 has been faithfully preserving and passing on the deposit of the gospel for many centuries, it is appropriate to incorporate liturgical elements such as creeds, confessions, historical prayers, and beloved hymns alongside of newer songs, extemporaneous prayers, corporate readings and personal testimony. Worship in the church should be ever old and new, should aspire to speak to people of all ages and generations and 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).

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.

Appendix 3: Children in Church

Jesus made space for children in his life and ministry and therefore, so should the church. This does not necessarily mean that children need to be included in every meeting or function, but it does mean that there must be priority consideration to their needs and gracious accommodation to their presence and stage of growth. Practically speaking, this means investing in safe and welcoming spaces for children of all ages, from nursery, to CM to Youth Ministry. It also means volunteering in these ministries so that we can work together to raise up our children in the ways and word of God. Children are helped by meeting other adults, other than mom and dad, who love Jesus and believe the same things they're being taught at home. We will endeavour to provide ample space and well trained and screened leaders and volunteers to lead in this effort. We will also make space for children in our main Sunday morning worship experience. Our typical practice is to include the children in the first half of the service so that they can sing, pray and hear Scripture read alongside their parents. We then release the children down to the CM area where they can hear a gospel lesson pitched to their own stage of learning and language development. We grant freedom to parents who may wish to keep their children with them for the adult preaching time. To make this work, we ask everyone to be gracious should there be the occasional disruption, and we ask parents to be considerate of others around them should their children experience an extended period of agitation. We provide special seating at the end of aisles and in the back of each section to make it easy for mom and dad to step out of the service when necessary. We firmly believe that with grace and consideration together we should be able to balance our desire to be welcoming to families and submitted to God's word within our services.