

CORPORATE WORSHIP

AT REDEEMING GRACE CHURCH

Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! (Psalm 99:5)

INTRODUCTION

Why This Paper?

We were made for worship. As beings designed to be living sacrifices for God (Rom. 12:1-2) our worship can and should encompass all of our lives, permeating every place we occupy and every activity we pursue. On Sunday mornings, however, we focus that worship as a community into a time of singing before God.

This paper focuses on that more narrow aspect of corporate worship. We seek to ground our practice of corporate worship and our structure of the Worship Ministry¹ in theological convictions derived from Scripture. To that end, this paper is an effort to explain from the Bible why we do what we do in our corporate singing when we gather in various corporate meetings, especially on Sunday mornings.

The Ministry Pyramid

If we picture a ministry as a pyramid, we can stack the layers from the bottom to the top as follows: theological convictions, guiding principles, practice. Our theological convictions are grounded on the bedrock of Scripture, our guiding principles are distilled from our theological convictions, and our practice puts the principles into action.

Our theological convictions require us to answer the question, “What does Scripture say about this ministry?” Because it derives directly from Scripture, this foundational layer is least susceptible to change, though it may be updated as our understanding of Scripture develops over time.

Moving up to the middle layer, we ask, “How do we translate our theological convictions into guiding principles for this ministry?” These are principles based on Scriptural truth that act as a bridge between our theology (what we believe) and our practice (what we do).

The top layer of the pyramid, our practice of ministry, is the answer to the question, “What do we actually do?” This is the most flexible of the three layers, able to change when necessary to best suit the needs of the church.

¹ “Worship Ministry” refers to the team of musicians/singers and their service to the church in providing musical support for the corporate singing of the church, primarily on Sunday mornings.

OUR THEOLOGICAL CONVICTIONS ABOUT CORPORATE WORSHIP

Let us first acknowledge that constructing a theology of worship is a difficult task. Among the challenges are:

- People have strong personal preferences about song, musical styles, volume of music, and more.
- Though worship is often pictured or described, Scripture nowhere clearly and simply defines what “worship” is.
- Scripture offers no single prescription for what God expects a Christian worship service to look like, hence the wide range of expressions of worship services across the globe.

Despite these difficulties we may press ahead, confident not in our own wisdom or traditions, but armed with the confidence that God’s Word provides everything we need to inform our understanding and practice of worship. We begin by asking: *What are the key theological convictions derived from Scripture that should govern our principles and practice of corporate worship?*

1. Convictions about the Bible

God is a speaking God who by His Spirit has graciously disclosed himself in human words (Genesis 1:3, 28, Hebrews 1:1). We believe that God has inspired the words preserved in the Scriptures, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, which are both record and means of His saving work in the world (Matthew 22:31-32, John 10:35, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21; 3:15-16). The Bible is to be believed, as God’s instruction, in all that it teaches; obeyed, as God’s command, in all that it requires; and trusted, as God’s pledge, in all that it promises. As God’s people hear, believe, and do the Word, they are equipped as disciples of Christ and witnesses to the power of the gospel (1 Timothy 4:11-13, 2 Timothy 3:14-16). We believe that the Bible is sufficient to instruct us how to live as worshipers of God.

2. Convictions about God

a. God is the infinite, wise, creator and ruler of all. God is infinitely perfect in all His attributes. He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible (Genesis 1:1, Psalm 33:6, John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 11:3), and is therefore worthy to receive all glory and adoration (Romans 11:36). Immortal and eternal, He perfectly and exhaustively knows the end from the beginning, sustains and sovereignly rules over all things, and providentially brings about His eternal good purposes to redeem a people for himself and restore His fallen creation, to the praise of His glorious grace (Psalm 33:10-11; 115:3, Proverbs 16:4; 21:1, Daniel 4:34-35, Romans 8:28, Ephesians

1:3-10).

b. God has eternally purposed to glorify Himself by dwelling with His people.

Throughout the history of mankind, God has graciously revealed Himself to His people. From the Garden to New Jerusalem, as we read through the Bible it is evident that God desires to dwell among His people (Gen. 2:8-17; Exod. 25:1-9; John 1:14; 1 Cor. 3:16; Rev. 21:1-4) and make His presence and will known to them (Gen. 2; Exod. 34; Deut. 5, etc.) through various means, particularly through His Word and His Son, Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:6)

c. God is triune. There is one God, and only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4, 1 Corinthians 8:6), eternally existing in three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 29:18, 2 Corinthians 13:14), who know, love, and glorify one another.

i. God the Father is the Creator of heaven and earth. He sustains all His creatures by His Word and works all things for the good of those who love Him. And in His great mercy and grace, He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, for mankind's redemption. He intends that all creation should live to the praise of His glory.

ii. God the Son became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. Now and forever fully God and fully man, He is the only mediator between God and man. By His death in our place, He removed the guilt of our sins and reconciled us to God. After His death, He rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, and now is seated at God's right hand, having received from the Father the name above every name.

iii. God the Holy Spirit regenerates the unbeliever and unites believers to Jesus Christ in faith, and dwells within the believer to magnify the Son. He also empowers every believer for the Christian life and imparts spiritual gifts for the edification of the church.

3. Convictions about Worship²

a. God is worthy of worship. (Rom. 11:36; Psalms 115:3, Daniel 4:34-35, Ephesians 1:3-10).

b. Worship is the proper response of all human beings to the one true God. (Ex. 20:2-6; Matt. 22:36-38; Rev. 5:6-14;).

c. The fall transforms human beings from God-centered worshipers to self-centered idolaters. (Rom. 1:18-25; 5:12)

² Portions of this section are adapted from *Worship by the Book*, edited by D.A. Carson, chapter 1.

d. Only redemption in Christ restores human beings to the desire to worship God in Spirit and truth (John 4:23-24).

e. True worship is God-centered, highlighting the gospel and the saving work of the Father through the Son by the power of the Spirit (Rev. 7:9-12).

f. True worship is all of life: personal and corporate; adoration and action. (Rom. 12:1-2).

h. True worship on earth echoes and is informed by ongoing worship in heaven. (Rev. 4-5; 7:9-12; 15:2-4; 19:1-8).

4. Convictions about music

a. Music is a gift from God.

God created all things, both visible and invisible (Col. 1:16), and this includes music. Music, taken by itself apart from any associations with other things such as words and culture, is a morally neutral language that affects our emotions, and God gave it to man to enjoy it for His glory. (1 Tim. 6:17; 1 Cor. 10:31)

b. Music is to be used in the worship of God by the people of God.

Throughout the Bible, the people of God used music in their worship of God (Exod. 15; Ps. 98:4-6; Eph. 5:19-20, etc.), and singing seems to be an integral part of the heavenly worship (Rev. 5:9-10).

c. Music can stir up and express God-glorifying affections and emotions.

Throughout Scripture we see that music is a gift not only to be directed to God for His glory but also to be received from God for the joy and strengthening of the worshiper. The book of Psalms, Israel's hymnal, gave them prayers to help them express a range of emotions in their songs to God. We see various examples of music and song bringing comfort or strength or the empowering of the Spirit to believers (Eph. 5:18-20; Col. 3:16; 2 Kings 3:15; 1 Sam. 16:23; 1 Chron. 13:8). While we never want to use music to manipulate anyone, we do want to welcome its soul-stirring power for the glory of God.

d. Music helps us remember the truth about God (Deut. 31:21)

e. Music helps us express our unity in the gospel (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Rom. 15:5-6)

5. Convictions about leadership

a. Pastor/elders are to care for the flock entrusted to their care by God as under-shepherds (1 Pet. 5:1-3; Acts 20:28). They are responsible for the spiritual health of the flock and one day will give an account to God for His people. They are responsible to lead the gathered congregation (1Tim. 2-3) for the glory of God and the edification of God's people. This responsibility includes ensuring that

God is worshiped both passionately and also “decently and in order.” (1 Cor. 14:40)

b. God provides gifted people in the congregation to serve in a variety of leadership capacities. While the Elders are to oversee the life of the church, leadership in the church is not limited to them. The Spirit imparts many gifts (1 Cor. 12) and raises up other leaders (Acts 6; Rom. 12:6-8; 1Tim. 3:8-13) to accomplish His purposes. This leadership may include leading corporate worship on Sunday mornings during the service.

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR CORPORATE WORSHIP

Our guiding principles of worship ministry are derived from the theological convictions described above. These guiding principles are the bridge between our theology of corporate worship and our practice of corporate worship.

1. Under the Word

We worship a God who revealed Himself authoritatively through creation, His Son, and His Word. In order for us to worship God with an accurate knowledge of Him, the words we sing must be truth-driven, based on the Bible and what it teaches about His glorious being and perfections. While the Bible may not address “corporate worship” as a term, or lay out a prescription for a worship service, we believe the Bible has all that God desires us to have regarding corporate worship and is sufficient to be our guide.

2. God-Centered

Apart from the Triune God’s gracious self-disclosure, there would be no worship of God, for worship is our *response* to God’s revelation of Himself in creation and in His redemptive work through Jesus Christ. The initiative for worship comes from God, who calls us to respond to Him for His glory and our joy. This means that our corporate singing will be God-centered, focused primarily on God’s being, attributes, and actions, rather than on ourselves. We worship the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit (Jn. 4:23-26; Eph. 2:18). As worshipers, we seek not to empty our minds but to continually fill them with truth about the One True God.

3. Christ-Exalting

The focal point of God’s revelation in the Bible is God’s redemptive work through Jesus Christ. He is the One who died to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18), and He is in focus of the heavenly worship (Rev. 5:6-14), and therefore, our worship must bring the person and work of Christ, especially at the cross, centrally into view. Christ is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5) and without His redemptive

work on the cross, our worship of God will not be acceptable to God. This is why we must offer our worship to God through Christ (Heb. 13:15). Our worship must be Christ-exalting because it is the will of God the Father to bestow on the Son the name above every name and He desires every knee to bow before Him because of His death on the cross (Philip. 2:8-10). This means that our corporate singing will have strong emphases on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

4. Spirit-empowered

The Holy Spirit is our Helper who guides us into all the truth and glorifies Jesus Christ. (Jn. 16:13-14) Through Him we are regenerated; given ears to hear and faith to respond to the gospel call. The Spirit gifts each believer in unique ways, for the common good. He dwells in the individual believer as well as in the living temple that is the church gathered as a worshiping community. His presence in corporate worship means we can expect and anticipate spontaneous and unexpected manifestations of His presence and blessing.

5. Whole-hearted

We are made for worship, designed to respond to God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This great God is worthy of great praise, which means worshiping Him reverently yet demonstrably, humbly yet passionately. Such worship can be expressed in everything from kneeling in silence to joyful singing accompanied by clapping, hand-raising, dancing, and even shouting. Of all the instruments in use on any given Sunday, the most important will always be the living voice of the congregation of the redeemed.

6. Joyful

God's intention for His people, even in a broken and pain-filled world, is joy. While feelings of happiness may be variable and unreliable, hearts made glad in God can be the consistent experience of God's people. Why? First, because God Himself is joyful. He rejoices over His people (Isa. 62:5) and even sings songs of joy over them (Zeph. 3:17). Jesus gives His joy to His disciples (John 15:9-12). Second, living this side of the Incarnation of Christ, joy is even more pronounced. His arrival is good news of great joy (Luke 2:10). His resurrection turns sorrow into joy (Luke 24:52), transforming every Sunday into an Easter celebration and every day into an experience of His joy-filled kingdom (Ps. 118:24; Jam. 1:2; Phil. 4:4; Rom. 14:17). Joy inexpressible is the present provision (1 Pet. 1:8-9) and certain future (Rev. 19:7) for each of Christ's followers.

7. Multi-generational

Over 35 years, our church has become a multi-generational congregation. What was once a more homogeneous group of younger adults has developed into a church attended by newborns and grandparents and everything between. We will seek to

provide Sunday morning worship in styles and songs that works for a range of ages. We desire a joyful, celebratory, reverently expressive experience that encourages all believers to join in. Recognizing that the church is always one generation away from extinction, we want to “tilt young” in our services in ways that invite the next generation to join in and fully participate in response to God’s amazing grace. Most importantly, the gospel, not any particular musical style, is the great unifying force in our congregation and our worship (Eph. 2:13-18, Rev. 7:9-10, Gen. 12:3).

OUR PRACTICE OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

Our practice of worship ministry is our attempt to translate our guiding principles, which are derived from our theological convictions, into actual practice. While how these elements are expressed in different contexts varies, these are the main components we currently include in our practice of corporate singing.

- 1. Elders:** In recognition of the God-given responsibility of the Elders to lead the church, they are responsible for all that goes on in our corporate meetings. This includes overseeing all the aspects of the corporate singing (leadership, song list, time management, etc.).
- 2. Worship Leader:** We have a designated leader who is gifted in leadership and music to lead us in singing of God’s praise. The leader’s responsibility in corporate singing may include song selection, preparing the worship team, leading by example as a worshiper, responding to opportunities for prophecy, and closing the worship time.
- 3. Worship Team:** Due to the size of our congregation, we have a team of gifted musicians and singers who are eager to use their spiritual gifts to help us express a variety of appropriate responses to God in our corporate singing. A team of musicians and singers can cover a wide dynamic range musically, which will then enable the congregation to freely express different emotions in the worship of God. The team members are also expected to be examples of wholehearted, joyful worship of God.
- 4. Song List/Theme:** A list of songs is chosen prior to the corporate gathering by the worship leader and is subsequently reviewed and approved by the Elder(s) overseeing the Sunday meeting.
- 5. Call to worship, exhortation, Scripture reading, and prayer:** In addition to singing, our times of corporate worship may also include other elements such as a call to worship, an exhortation, Scripture reading, or prayers. Extemporaneous exhortation/prayer during the time of singing is also encouraged as the Spirit prompts the leader to do so.
- 6. Physical expressiveness:** Kneeling, bowing down, clapping and raising of hands, dancing, shouting, standing in awe, etc., are appropriate and biblical expressions of worship to God. As God reveals the different aspects of His character and His work,

which elicit a variety of emotions, we will engage our minds and emotions and respond to God by using different verbal and physical expressions in our corporate singing, doing all for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), and doing so decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40).

7. Gifts of the Spirit: God desires for us to prophesy for the edification of the gathered church. (1 Cor. 14) In times of corporate singing, the believers are encouraged to exercise their spiritual gifts to build up the church. The person overseeing the ministry microphone will either allow someone to share his/her prophetic impression, or decline, based on the content and appropriateness of the impression for the meeting. The same guidelines apply for tongues and interpretation, as well as other gifts of the Spirit.

8. Musical style: We will use a variety of musical styles to support our corporate singing, but our musical style will be predominantly contemporary, joyful, and celebratory. In order to allow the truths about God and His work to freshly impact our hearts and emotions, we seek to use musically creative elements in our corporate worship. These may include different styles of music and songs, new arrangements, singing with no instruments, incorporating new instruments, using a choir, instrumental ensembles, etc. These elements can also be used to highlight the corporate aspects of the church's singing.

9. Sound: Our guiding principles for setting the sound levels during corporate worship are:

- Sound levels will never exceed National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) or Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) standards.
- Sound levels will vary between 88-95 decibels (dBA).
- Sound will be mixed in such a way that the worship team vocals are prominent and the worshipers will be able to hear the voices of the congregation.

CONCLUSION

This brief paper seeks to ground our practice of corporate worship in theological convictions derived from the Bible and guiding principles drawn from those convictions. Our practices will surely change over time, and whenever our current practice requires reconsideration, a thoughtful evaluation and grounding of all our practices in the Bible is necessary in order for our corporate singing to be guided by God's Word.

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