

# BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP & THEIR APPLICATION TO LOCAL CHURCH MINISTRY

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## Introduction

The good news about worship in our day is that it is a subject which, after many years of general neglect (A.W. Tozer called worship “The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church”), is receiving well-deserved attention and emphasis. The bad news is that worship has become an issue about which there is much conflict and divisiveness in our churches.

The following document is an attempt to crystallize some guiding *principles* of worship from Scripture (in the absence of detailed *prescriptions* for worship in the pages of the New Testament). Corporate worship involves attitudes and acts of praise and adoration in response to God for His greatness, goodness, and grace – including praying, preaching singing, giving, etc.—at the invitation and under the authority of the Word of God.

We want to stand firmly on biblical ground in the ordering of our worship life as local congregations, while allowing for the variety and freedom which the New Testament allows and avoiding “teaching as doctrine the precepts of men.” Above all we want to glorify in our worship the One who is deserving of all praise.

1. God’s glory, and our joyful celebration of it in worship, should be the focus and goal of all life and ministry.
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*For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen.*  
(Romans 11:36)

Worship is an end in itself. By definition other types of ministry necessarily have horizontal, man-focused aspects; but worship is purely vertically focused. It is the primary purpose for which God created us and therefore our highest endeavor and greatest fulfillment. (Isaiah 43:6-7; Psalm 16:11; Matthew 22:35-38; 1 Peter 4:11)

THEREFORE: We shall give worship careful focus and attention in the life of this church. We will relate all of our activities to it and to the goal of magnifying the glory of God. We will make explicit God’s glory as our most important pursuit, aim and preoccupation.

2. Worship is first and foremost for God.
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*“Worship God.”*  
(Revelation 19:10; 22:9)

God is the subject and object of worship; it is about Him and for Him. As God, He is absolutely unique and therefore the only One worthy of our praise; as Creator, He and He alone is deserving of the worship of His creatures and of His creation. (Romans 11:36; Psalm 148:1-13)

THEREFORE: We will focus on glorifying the Lord in our worship, and in offering up a suitable and appropriate sacrifice of praise to His name. Our supreme motivation in our worship will be His pleasure rather than our own fulfillment or enjoyment. We will come to give more than to receive, yet realizing that we only have something to give because of God’s prior gracious giving to us.

3. Worship is a dialogue between God and His people, a rhythm of revelation and response.
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*For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him.  
That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory.  
(2 Corinthians 1:20)*

In worship God speaks to us through His Word; and we respond with our hearts, voices and bodies. The impartation of *theology* is not complete until it is answered with appropriate *doxology*. This pattern is seen throughout Scripture: God always acts first to reveal Himself and to reach out to man; all worship is a response to God's prior revealing and saving initiative. (Psalm 48:10; 150:2; 2 Cor. 1:20) The historic worship structure of Word and Table follows this pattern.

THEREFORE: We will allow for a healthy balance of the Word proclaimed (through preaching, Scriptures readings and Scripture-based songs) and the people's response (in song, prayer, confession, testimony and the Lord's Supper). We will allow adequate time for response after the sermon. We will also celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly, and will give it its proper due as a primary response to God's grace by allowing sufficient time for it.

#### 4. The Word must be central in our worship.

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*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.  
(Colossians 3:16)*

Worship is our creaturely response to God's self-revelation. We are responsible to praise Him as He really is, not as we would suppose or hope Him to be. God has revealed Himself and His glory through the inspired Scriptures. (Psalm 56:4; 138:2)

THEREFORE: We will read the Word, pray the Word, preach the Word, sing the Word in our corporate and private worship. We will allow the Word to invite us to worship, to provide the context and motivation for our worship, to inform and enrich and fuel our worship. We will avoid just singing men's thoughts about God in the absence of what He has told us about Himself in Scripture.

#### 5. Worship is the responsibility of all of God's people.

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*Oh, magnify the LORD with me,  
and let us exalt His name together!  
(Psalm 34:3)*

Worship is a verb; it is something we do, not something we watch. An important expression of the priesthood of all believers is that every individual has a vital role to play in the corporate worship of the church. (Psalm 107:32; Romans 15:5-6)

THEREFORE: We will further whole-hearted participation in worship in every way possible: by encouraging week-long worship and spiritual preparation for corporate worship, by enhancing the physical environment for worship, by carefully selecting the music for worship (using substantial, singable, mostly familiar songs), by giving opportunity for corporate prayer and Scripture reading, etc.

#### 6. Our worship is acceptable in and through Christ our High Priest.

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*Through Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God,  
that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name  
(Hebrews 13:15)*

Jesus Christ is the Leader of our worship. We come in Him and by His worthiness into God's presence, and He gathers up our modest worship into His own perfect offering. (Hebrews 8:1-2; 10:19-22)

THEREFORE: We will strive for excellence in our worship, but not see technical expertise or artistic merit as ends in themselves, or as a means to gain God's favor or acceptance. We will encourage a mindset of service rather than performance among our worship leaders, realizing that ultimately our worship is pleasing to God only because we come through Christ.

7. Our response of worship is enabled, motivated and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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*We are the true circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God  
and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.*  
(Philippians 3:3)

As God, the Holy Spirit deserves our adoration and praise as much as the Father and the Son. Yet He chooses to glory not Himself but rather to point us to Christ (John 16:14) and thus lead us to the Father in worship. Jesus Christ is the Way into the Father's presence; the Holy Spirit is our Guide. We *can* come to the Father in worship because of the work of Christ; we *want* to come into the Father's presence in worship because of the work of the Holy Spirit, assuring us of our standing by grace (Romans 8:14-17) and filling us for the work of praise (Ephes. 5:18-19).

THEREFORE: We will not focus unduly on the Holy Spirit in our worship, but seek to exalt Christ (1 Cor. 12:3) as the Spirit Himself desires to do. We will humbly seek the Spirit's help in our weakness to enable us to desire, pray to and worship God. (Rom. 8:28) We will rest in His divine enablement to the glory of God. (Romans 8)

8. Worship is the response of our entire lives to God.

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*I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,  
holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.*  
(Romans 12:1)

Worship is not just a weekly event, but rather a way of living in dependence upon and gratitude towards our gracious Lord. While corporate worship is an important expression of that walk of worship, it must be fueled by lives of personal and private devotion and faithfulness. (John 4:21-24; 1 Cor. 10:31) Worship is also the expression of the totality of our being—mind, emotions, will, actions: “all that we are responding to all that God is.” (Psalm 135:5; 100:3-4; 22:22; 98:4; Hebrews 13:15-16)

THEREFORE: We will teach the importance of and promote a lifestyle of worship. We will magnify the glory of God as the focus and goal of all of life. We will treat corporate worship not as an interruption of everyday life, but rather as a gathered celebration of the God Who makes life worth living.

9. God is much more concerned with our heart than with the form of our worship.

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*“Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”*  
(1 Samuel 16:7)

*“I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice.”*

(Hosea 6:6)

The New Testament (in contrast to the Old Testament) is remarkably non-prescriptive when it comes to the shape and form of corporate worship services; we can only assume that God intended to allow considerable freedom in these areas. Both Testaments, on the other hand, are very clear about how seriously God takes the heart attitude and motivation of one's worship. (2 Chron. 30:18-20; Mark 12:33)

THEREFORE: We will stress the inward reality of worship and remain flexible in our approach to form.

#### 10. Worship should promote the unity and edification of the Body.

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*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live  
in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,  
that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
(Romans 15:5-6)*

The Body of Christ is not an affinity group, but rather a disparate band of saved sinners whom only the Spirit can unify. We must fight the rampant individualism of our age and of our natures, and actively encourage the building up of the body. (Ephes. 4:1-6,15-16; 5:19-21; Col. 3:12-17; Heb. 10:23-25)  
THEREFORE: We will exult in our diversity and seek to learn from one another various expressions of worship (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). We will avoid novelty for its own sake, however, and will always strive to keep the health of the whole body in mind when it comes to innovation or change in worship. We will not seek to promote our personal agendas or preferences in worship, but rather prayerfully and deliberately seek the good of the body as a whole. We will exhort one another to consider another's needs before our own (Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:2-3), and to look beyond self to our corporate identity in Christ.

#### 11. Young and old need each other in the Body of Christ.

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*Young men and maidens together, old men and children!  
Let them praise the name of the LORD, for His name alone is exalted.  
(Psalm 148:12-13)*

The diversity of the body of Christ necessarily and significantly includes the mixing of generations. Young people are to honor and learn from the stability and heritage of their elders, while the young can add new energy and fresh expressions of worship. (Psalm 79:13; 149:1; Titus 2:2-8)

THEREFORE: We will respect the special contributions of young and old, and seek to involve and engage all groups in our services without giving preference to one over another. We will seek to use godly discernment in evaluating all materials used in our corporate worship.

#### 12. These things must be taught and re-taught.

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*Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus,  
that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God,  
just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.  
(1 Thessalonians 4:1)*

The above truths are important elements of Christian understanding and discipleship, but must be consistently and persistently taught if they are to lodge in hearts and change attitudes and behaviors. (2 Peter 1:12-13)

THEREFORE: We will teach these principles and exhort one another to grow in these areas. We will seek to model these truths before one another in our congregation, and as an example to our community and to the wider body of Christ elsewhere.