

GRACE CHURCH OF NORTH OLMSTED

BIBLICAL PHILOSOPHY OF WORSHIP

PURPOSE OF THIS STATEMENT

The purpose of this statement is to:

- (1) Define and describe Biblical worship
- (2) Provide basic guidelines for the worship services at GCNO, with a view to ensuring that the form of worship is conducive to and consistent with the Biblical understanding of worship
- (3) To address specific issues regarding the style of the worship services at GCNO

BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF WORSHIP

I. The Essence of Biblical Worship

The subject of worship in Scripture is a rich and deep study, involving many words and concepts, but perhaps the most basic concept of worship is found in the meaning of the Hebrew verb most often translated *worship*. The word *שָׁחָה* (*shaw-khaw*) means *to bow down*. Psalm 95:6 could serve as a definition: *Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our maker*. Often where we see people worshipping in Scripture we find them physically bowing or prostrating themselves before the Lord (Ex. 34:8; Rev. 1:17). Of course, it is possible to physically bow down in a temple without inwardly bowing to God's lordship, which is why Scripture always emphasizes the need for inward brokenness before God, as opposed to mere outward demonstration (cf. Ps. 51:6, 17; Joel 2:13; John 4:24). To worship the Lord, therefore, fundamentally, is to acknowledge Him for who He is and to humble ourselves before Him, submitting to His lordship over us. According to Psalm 95 this is done with joy (v. 1), and with thanksgiving (v. 2), and is something only God's people are capable of (v. 7). When we consider the words and phrases that are used in parallel with the word *worship* in the Old Testament we find that worship includes the following concepts: sacrifice and offering (Gen. 22:5; 1 Chron. 16:29); service (Deut. 11:16); fear of God (Ps. 5:7); repentance (Ps. 22:27); giving glory to God (Ps. 29:2); singing (Ps. 66:4); exalting God (Ex. 15:2; Ps. 99:5); and praising God's name (Ps. 138:2).

Biblical worship includes the following:

- (1) A true understanding of God and a declaration of all of His revealed attributes (Ex. 34:6-8; Ps. 99)
- (2) A sincere, inward response of the heart to God that includes fear, humility, and submission (Is. 66:1-5)
- (3) The acknowledgement, confession, and repentance of sin (Josh. 7:19)
- (4) Drawing near to God by means of a blood sacrifice (Heb. 10:19-22; James 4:8)
- (5) The exaltation of God with the mouth from a heart filled with joy and thanksgiving (Ps. 149)
- (6) Unconditional obedience to God's commands (1 Sam. 15:22)
- (7) A life wholly devoted to loving and serving God in all things (Rom. 12:1)
- (8) Participation in corporate worship with God's people (Heb. 10:25)
- (9) Proclamation of the true and living God to the heathen (Ps. 96; Matt. 28:16-20)

II. Corporate Worship in Old Testament Israel

Corporate worship in the Old Testament was, geographically, centered around the tabernacle and then later, under Solomon, the temple in Jerusalem. The mercy seat, located between the cherubim and over the ark of the covenant within the holy of holies, was understood to be the throne of God and the place where He met with His people (Ex. 25:22; Ps. 99:1). Israel's approach to a holy God was the central theme of Old Testament worship. God could only be approached according to His very specific terms. This included the tabernacle itself, blood sacrifices, a high priest chosen by God, and the Levites who were the only Israelites allowed to minister in the tabernacle. It also included rules about who could participate in worship (clean) and who could not participate in worship (unclean).

Temporally, Israel's worship was centered around the weekly Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-10), an annual calendar of spring and fall feasts (Lev. 23), and a cycle of seven Sabbath years known as the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25).

It was not until the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem, by David, that music became a prescribed part of Israel's worship (1 Chron. 15). In anticipation of the building of the temple, David made preparations for the inclusion of music, including singing, cymbals, and stringed instruments, all performed by and under the direction of the Levites (1 Chron. 25).

III. Corporate Worship in the New Testament Church

A. The New Paradigm

The emphasis upon a specific geographical place of worship (the temple), with detailed liturgical forms, holy days and types that characterized the worship under the Old Covenant has been replaced with the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ under the New Covenant. He fulfilled the types and now the believer has direct access to God through Jesus Christ who is at once our eternal High Priest and our once-for-all, perfect Sacrifice (Heb. 10:19-22). Now the believer (both individually and corporately) is the temple of God, by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). We now offer up spiritual sacrifices of praise, thanksgiving, and good works, acceptable through Christ (1 Pet. 2:5; Titus 2:14; Phil. 4:18). It should be noted that it would be incorrect to think of Old Testament worship as merely physical. God clearly demanded spiritual worship and a new heart even in the Old Testament (Mic. 6:8; Ps. 51:6; John 3:10).

B. Description of New Testament Corporate Worship

Immediately after Pentecost, the church met daily at the temple and in each other's homes, listening to the teaching of the Apostles, fellowshiping, eating together, praying and praising God (Acts 2:42-47). At some point it would seem the church began meeting primarily on the first day of the week, presumably because it was on this day that Jesus rose from the dead (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; cf. Rev. 1:10). When the New Testament church gathered for worship it borrowed much of its form from the synagogues (cf. Luke 4:16-28).

From the Acts and the Epistles of the New Testament we are able to glean a picture of corporate worship as practiced by the early church. It certainly included the following:

- (1) Reading of Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3)
- (2) Preaching and teaching of Scripture (Col. 1:28; 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2)
- (3) Singing (Col. 3:16; cf. Acts 16:25; Rev. 5:9)
- (4) Prayer (Acts 1:14; 12:12; 1 Tim. 2:1-3)
- (5) Practice of the ordinances of baptism and communion (1 Cor. 11:23-27)
- (6) Practice of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14; 1 Pet. 4:10-11)
- (7) Financial giving (Acts 4:32-5:2; 1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:1-15)
- (8) Fellowship and eating together (Acts 2:46; 20:7)
- (9) Church discipline (1 Cor. 5:1-8, see especially v. 4)

As one reviews the New Testament evidence regarding the activity of the gathered church, the following observations should be noted:

- (1) The overwhelming centrality of the preaching and teaching of the Scriptures
- (2) The relative absence of music
- (3) The complete absence of the mention of any musical instruments in relation to worship
- (4) Although service and evangelism are a central theme in regard to the New Testament description of the activity of the gathered church, they are not included in the above list because they were not part of the corporate worship service.

GUIDELINES FOR CORPORATE WORSHIP AT GCNO

I. The Nature of Worship at GCNO

A. Preliminary Understanding

- (1) True worship is dependent upon the spiritual condition of the individuals within the congregation
 - (a) A new heart
 - (b) Walking in the Spirit
 - (c) Walking in the truth
- (2) No outward form of worship can make up for the lack of genuine love for God
- (3) Although no form alone, in and of itself, constitutes worship in God's eyes, yet the form must be consistent with that which God demands in true worship.
 - (a) Doctrinal soundness and an accurate understanding of the nature of God
 - (b) A form that is centered upon Christ and the cross, the only means by which we may draw near to God
 - (c) A form that is consistent with reverence and fear
 - (d) A form that is conducive of true humility and brokenness
 - (e) A form that reflects genuine joy and thanksgiving

B. The Centrality of Preaching and Teaching of the Word of God

- (1) The preaching of the Word must be central, because it is the instrument whereby the Spirit produces faith and obedience. As individuals hear and respond to the Word of God they are sanctified and thereby truly enter into worship (2 Tim. 3:14-4:2).
- (2) Preaching and teaching should be generally expository. The main purpose of the teacher should be (a) to understand the text of Scripture, (b) to explain the text clearly, and (c) to exhort according to the text. This will help to prevent the teacher from going astray from the central Biblical message.

C. Other Important Elements of Worship

- (1) Corporate Prayer
 - (a) Led by genuinely spiritual, godly men
 - (b) Prayer after the Biblical model that includes simplicity, humility, invocation, exaltation, praise, confession, and supplication in the name of Christ
- (2) Reading of Scripture
 - (a) Demonstrates our belief in its authority in our church and in our lives
 - (b) Expresses the fact that our purpose, primarily, is to hear from God
 - (c) The English translation used should be limited to the NASB, KJV, NKJV, or ESV, for reasons of accuracy
- (3) Congregational Singing
 - (a) An expression of praise and thanksgiving toward God
 - (b) Generally limited to theologically sound hymnody
 - (c) Minimal instrumental accompaniment in a traditional or classical style that is consistent with reverence for God, simplicity, and humility
- (4) The Lord's Supper
 - (a) To remember the Lord's death until He comes again, according to His command (1 Cor. 11:26)
 - (b) Monthly, alternating between the morning and evening service
- (5) Financial Giving
 - (a) An opportunity to acknowledge that all we have is from God
 - (b) An opportunity to practically demonstrate that God is first in our lives
 - (c) An opportunity to support the ministry of the church in a practical way
 - (d) Weekly

D. The Importance of Male Leadership

We believe that it is God's design for men to lead the church (1 Tim. 2:8-15; Titus 1:5-9). Therefore, our worship services shall be led by godly men, including, but not limited to, the preaching, prayer, announcements, and song leading.

E. The Necessity of Excellence

Everything we do in our worship service should be done with excellence, not for the purpose of impressing people or drawing a crowd, but for the glory of God. Everything should be done in an orderly way, to the very best of our ability.

II. A Statement Regarding Special Music

A. Definition of Special Music

Music and/or singing that the congregation does not participate in. Special music includes choirs, quartets, solos, and instrumental numbers.

B. Concerns about Special Music

Although we would like to include tasteful, reverent special music in our worship service, our concerns regarding this category are as follows:

- (1) The tendency to move the worship service toward the modern concept of professional entertainment.
- (2) The tendency to move the worship service toward a contemporary, informal style.
- (3) The tendency to move the emphasis of worship from the hearing of the objective, authoritative Word of God, toward a more subjective, emotional experience. This tendency is evidenced by the fact that many evangelicals today equate worship primarily or even solely with the music aspect of the service.

We would be quick to acknowledge that the use of special music does not necessitate a movement in these directions, we only observe that is where it tends to lead.

C. Guidelines for Special Music

- (1) The lyrical content of the song should be Biblically accurate and theologically meaningful.
- (2) Groups are generally preferred over solos, hopefully minimizing the tendency toward competition, elitism, and vanity that often accompanies special music in churches.
- (3) Live accompaniment of musical instruments with singing is preferred over recorded accompaniment, hopefully minimizing the tendency toward the contemporary style.

D. The Spirituality of Those Who Participate in Special Music

The lives of those involved in the musical aspect of the worship service should be above reproach. This includes a profession of faith in Christ, evidenced by a life of obedience to the commands of Christ.

III. A Statement Regarding Contemporary Worship

A. Description of Contemporary Worship

It is difficult to accurately define *contemporary worship*. Perhaps it is best to contrast it with *traditional worship*. Although the categories might be best understood as a continuum, we would observe that the differences generally fall along the following lines:

CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP	TRADITIONAL WORSHIP
Sing contemporary choruses	Sing hymns from a hymn book
Use of a worship team	Use of a song leader
Contemporary / rock music (rock bands)	Traditional music (piano, organ, orchestra)
Large percentage of service devoted to music	Small percentage of service devoted to music
Shorter sermons (10-20 minutes)	Longer sermons (40-60 minutes)
Informal dress	Formal dress
Topical messages	In-depth exposition of Scripture
Messages on basic, practical matters	Emphasis on doctrine and theology

Inclusion of drama	No drama
Primarily involves the emotions	Primarily involves the intellect
Creating an informal, up-beat atmosphere	Creating a formal, reverent atmosphere

B. Concerns with Contemporary Worship

We should begin by noting that nothing is inherently wrong *because* it is contemporary. Contemporary simply means modern or current. Rather there are trends in this modern form of worship that we find to be misguided at best, pernicious and even blasphemous at worst. Following is a list of the general concerns:

- (1) The tendency toward pleasing men rather than God
- (2) The tendency toward emotional vacuity rather than intelligent worship
- (3) The tendency toward informality with God rather than the fear of God
- (4) The tendency toward minimizing rather than elevating the Word of God
- (5) The tendency toward the sensual rather than the spiritual
- (6) The tendency toward entertainment rather than Biblical worship
- (7) The tendency toward moralism rather than the Cross

We are not necessarily outright condemning any church that takes up any of the above listed practices, but we would point out that these tendencies look a lot like the apostate church of the last days (2 Tim. 3:1-9; 4:3-4; Jude 4, 16-19). We also observe that once the contemporary style of worship is generally adopted, the worship tends to move in these directions rather quickly.

C. Our Commitment to Traditional Worship

We want to be clear about our commitment to traditional worship. We realize that this commitment will be criticized by many from without as being out of step with the culture and contemporary evangelicalism. But we are committed to it, not for nostalgic reasons, nor from mere stubbornness, nor for reasons of preference, nor for fear of change, rather out of conviction. We believe Biblical worship is first and foremost reverent. Informal worship is, Biblically speaking, an oxymoron. We believe Biblical worship is centered around God's Word, the Cross, and the Gospel, all of which require a growth in knowledge and understanding as well as submission and obedience. We believe true Biblical worship is characterized by humility, simplicity, sobriety, and thanksgiving flowing out of a sincere heart and a genuine commitment to the lordship of Christ.

Worship is not something that can be manufactured through lively music and light-hearted choruses, nor is Biblical worship ever designed for the purpose of drawing in or impressing carnal people. Corporate worship is something that God takes quite seriously, and therefore demands our careful and reverent attention.

I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified - Leviticus 10:3.

D. Hymns and Choruses

It is not our purpose to make a clear demarcation between hymns and choruses, neither is it our purpose to declare all hymns above reproach owing to their antiquity nor to declare all choruses condemned owing to their recent origin. Rather we would observe, generally, that the most important hymnody of the past was written by pastors and theologians who wrote with an eye toward theological clarity and preciseness along with a depth of spiritual experience that is notoriously absent from much of the modern Christian music. The issue at hand is not merely doctrinal accuracy or theocentricity (although that is part of the issue), it is an issue of depth of theology, profundity of thought, and fullness of expression. Therefore, it is our purpose to retain the hymns, introduce more of the old hymns, cultivate a love for the hymns, and teach the hymns to our children.

IV. A Statement Regarding the Youth of GCNO

It needs to be stated that our guidelines for worship apply to youth gatherings as well. If we, as a church, are to maintain Biblical guidelines for worship, we must develop these convictions in our children and our youth.