

A Philosophy of Worship

Compiled by Michael Yurkovich

1. **Definition of Worship:** Warren Wiersbe defined worship as “a response of all that we are to all that God is, says, and does.”¹ It involves our mind, emotions and will in both subjective experience and objective obedience to God’s revealed truth. It is a life lived to the glory of God, motivated not by duty but by love for Him.
2. **Corporate Worship**
 - a. Worship isn’t simply singing on Sunday mornings. “Religious actions at religious gatherings of the community were not intended to be substitutes for a life devoted to the true worship of God but, rather, were to be its celebratory overflow”². There is not a worship part of the service. It is all worship. (Rom 12:1,2).
 - b. Worship is something in which we are to be continually engaged as individuals. Yet as Kent Hughes observes, “when there are a number of worshipers present, there is a participation in worship which is more intense than is the individual passion of any one of them when he is by himself.”³
 - c. All worship has both a vertical and a horizontal focus (Col 3:16). God gave spiritual gifts for the purpose of mutual edification, not for personal enjoyment. It follows that there is a closeness to God that we will not experience unless we allow other gifted believers to minister to us. (Heb 10:24-25, 1 Cor 12:7; 14:12; 1 Peter 4:10).
 - d. The Bible doesn’t provide outlines of worship services for Christians, but examples of crucial principles.
3. **Biblical principles for corporate worship**
 - a. **God-centered** (*Mat. 4:10; Ex. 20:3-6; Neh. 9:6; Jer. 10:6-10; Rev 15:4*)
 - i. Soren Kierkegaard compared corporate worship to a drama performance, in which the leaders are the prompters who simply cue the performers but are not the performers. The performers are the people in the congregation, and God Himself is the audience.
 - ii. We must not pursue excellent worship (an experience), but God (a person). We worship Him because He deserves it, because it is right, not out of any self-seeking desire to gain something from the act of worshipping. (1 Chron. 16:29)
 - iii. More specifically, our worship must be Christ-centered, exalting the triune God Who is most fully revealed in the New Testament, rather than speaking of “God” in vague terms. “Because Christ is the ultimate revelation of God, because He is the great epicenter of the New Testament (*and the Old*), He must be the central focus of New Testament worship.”⁴
 - iv. All worship must be empowered by the Holy Spirit (John 4:23; Phil. 3:3; Rom 8:15; Eph. 6:18)
 - v. We must recognize both God’s imminence and His transcendence, maintaining a proper balance between enjoying intimacy with God and approaching Him with genuine reverence (Heb. 12:28-29; Phil. 3:7-8, Ps. 25:14).

¹ Wiersbe, Warren W. “Real Worship” pg. 27

² Parrett, Gary A. “9.5 Theses on Worship” Christianity Today, February 2005.

³ Carson, D.A. “Worship by the Book” pg 42.

⁴ Carson, 154.

b. **Word-centered.** (*John 4:23-24*)

- i. As worship is to be done in “Spirit and in Truth,” we must be careful to inform all our activities of worship from the Word of God.
- ii. Scripture repeatedly presents a rhythm of reception & response
 1. In corporate worship, we receive truth from God through the reading and preaching of the Word, and respond to him in prayer and praise.
 2. See the example of Isaiah 6:
 - a. We are reminded of God’s awesome and holy character;
 - b. We are reminded of how God has intervened on behalf of sinners, by sending his Son to be an atoning sacrifice for us;
 - c. God charges us to be engaged in his ongoing work
 - d. We respond by offering our lives for his service
- iii. If we fail to grasp the truth of grace, Timothy Keller suggests that we will seek simply to perform for God to earn his favor. Our praise should be in response to a comprehension of the good news of God’s grace in Christ.⁵

c. **Intelligible** (*understandable to those present*) (*1 Cor. 14:23-33*)

- i. There is a place for careful forethought toward an organized structure to worship, for this avoids distractions that could hinder us from our goal of giving God glory and proclaiming his Word with clarity.
- ii. The activities selected for corporate worship must seek to “include as many *people* as possible, and exclude as few as possible.”⁶
- iii. Yet in seeking to be as accessible as possible to those in attendance, we must remain God-centered and not seeker-driven.
- iv. Music plays a major part in worship throughout the Bible. The particular musical style chosen must be intelligible to participants if it is to aid worship. Music that fails to stir the worshipper does not enhance the communication of the text, while freshness and creativity enhance one’s ability to worship (Ps. 96:1).
- v. Out of love for one another, we must personally approach any given service with the attitude of humility, willing to defer our own musical tastes to those of others (Phil 2:3-4).

d. **Authentic** (*Matt 15:8; Is. 29:13*)

- i. Worship is a natural response to an authentic encounter with God. We are not to worship to earn merit with God or to impress men. True worship is a matter of the heart, not mere external ritual (Deut. 6:4-5; Amos 5:21-24; John 4:23-24).
- ii. Any focus on the quality of worship activity must be motivated by a desire to revere God, rather than artificially manipulate the emotions of men. If we fail to truly worship, and simply try to entertain unsaved guests, they will fail to see any difference in us as believers, and will not be impacted with the sense “God is really among you” (1 Cor. 14:25).
- iii. Worship galvanizes our whole being – emotions, mind and will. It manifests itself both in adoration and in action (1 Cor. 10:31).
- iv. Even when believers don’t feel (*emotion*) like worshiping, they can authentically choose (*will*) to worship by proclaiming truths about God that they know to be true.

⁵ Carson, pg 215

⁶ Carson, pg. 74

4. Specific Application

a. God-Centered →

- i. While occasional solos may effectively communicate a Biblical truth, the majority of songs will involve the congregation as active participants rather than passive observers. When the congregation is singing, it is preferable that they be lead by multiple singers, so as to avoid drawing attention to an individual singer and away from God.
- ii. Worship teams should avoid the trend in some American churches where the focus is drawn to the talent of the musicians rather than on God. Complicated tunes, keys that are high for the congregation, and embellished melodies by leaders, all tend to make lead singers sound good, but hinder the congregation from participating.
- iii. Instrumental pieces can contribute to a worshipful atmosphere through the beauty of the music. The drawing of attention to God is aided by ensuring that pieces selected are relatively short and not of a virtuoso or showy style. Consideration must also be given to the composer's character and the context in which the piece was originally set.
- iv. The conduct and dress of those up front should not be distracting nor call attention to individuals.
- v. Amplification must be used with sensitivity. Leaders of singing are called to assist the congregation in its singing, not to replace it.
- vi. We seek simplicity without mediocrity. Pomp draws attention to men. But sloppiness detracts from proper awe, and communicates a lack of respect for the One being approached. All leading should be prepared ahead of time, whether in music, prayer, reading, announcing, or preaching, yet at the same time should allow for the Holy Spirit's leading. Gifting of individuals should be considered when selecting them for a particular roll in the worship service.
- vii. God-centered songs will focus primarily on God and his character and works, not on my needs. Two tests can be: 1) count the references to me vs. references to Christ; 2) can the song be sung just as well as a love song at a wedding?
- viii. Times of silent prayer and reflection can aid the sense of awe and dependence.

b. Word-Centered →

- i. Before any changes are made to the structure or style of worship services, the congregation needs to be taught the theological principles behind them.
- ii. The music should serve the preaching of the word. Songs selected should complement the theme(s) of the sermon when possible.
- iii. The lyrics in any given song must be true to Scripture, without distorting the meaning of Biblical texts by taking them out of context.
- iv. Lyrics should contain a depth of truth about God. Simply repeatedly telling God, "You are great! You are great!" without expanding on why He is great can become a mindless routine. But reminding ourselves and each other of specifics regarding His wonderful character and works naturally stirs the heart. A balance of doctrinal themes must be sought, avoiding overemphasis on a few popular truths.
- v. Services should be structured so as to provide reception of truth, followed by opportunity for response. Scriptures should frequently be read before responding in song. And it is quite natural to respond to the message of a sermon through praise and expression of commitment in song.

c. Intelligible →

- i. When selecting music, worship leaders should consult 1) the Bible 2) cultural context and 3) historic tradition, so as not to tailor music to personal tastes, but rather to seek music that is most accessible to the members of the congregation.
- ii. The worship director should openly consider the opinions of all who express ideas regarding the worship services. Suggestions will be evaluated based on the three criteria listed above.
- iii. The culture of our Westside congregation is generally suited to a more contemporary worship style. At the same time, there is value in also incorporating the rich heritage of traditional hymns, perhaps using contemporary instrumentation.
- iv. The tune and accompaniment of music must enhance the content of the lyric and be appropriate for the particular moment in the service in which it is used.
- v. Freshness is enhanced by regular introduction of songs that are new to the congregation, as the Psalms urge us to “sing a new song” to the Lord. Yet we must remember that too much change creates a sense of unrest and disorder.
- vi. Smooth transitions between events enhance order and decrease distraction.

d. Authentic →

- i. Though quality is a high priority, the condition of the hearts of the “lead worshippers” is more important than the quality of the music. The love and unity sought for in a church body should be exemplified in miniature on the worship team. Rehearsals should not only focus on preparing songs technically, but also on preparing hearts of the team spiritually.
- ii. Regular inclusion of personal testimonies in the service provides fresh examples of authentic encounters with God.
- iii. Leaders should not project themselves as “having it all together,” but should rather be appropriately vulnerable about their own imperfections, while never calling into doubt God’s faithfulness.
- iv. Leaders’ language must not be too stuffy, but neither too colloquial. Stuffiness destroys accessibility, but overly casual language loses transcendence. Leaders should model an attitude of genuine reverence and joy.
- v. Songs selected and words spoken should, at some point in the service, move members from adoration to action, challenging them to respond to the One they are worshiping with the whole of their life through serving and evangelizing.

*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.*

Col 3:16-17