

WORSHIP

WHAT IS WORSHIP?

Worship is at the core of our beings as Christians and yet we have, at times, let worship become an "agenda" item, one of the many "activities" that occur at Grace Covenant Church, something on equal footing with evangelism, prayer or missions. But worship is not just a church service, it is something we do at church service and the rest our waking hours. It is a reflection of our heart and a response to what we truly love. Worship is defined as "to have an intense love or admiration for, to show reverence for". Worship is then something everyone does towards various things and to varying degrees. Humans were created to worship God but the Fall resulted in chasm where it was easier to worship the creature rather than the Creator, easier to worship the form of our worship than to worship God Himself.

So how do we worship (give honor and worth to) God in our everyday lives? By repenting of our "worship" of other things (Ex 34:14), by loving God with all of our hearts through obedience (John 14:23), by sacrificing everything we hold dear just to be in the presence of God (Heb. 13:15-16), by laying aside our preconceived notions, physical talents and strengths and things built by our hands (John 4:23,24 to worship in spirit and truth), by giving God through the Holy Spirit the glory He is due just because of who He is and not because of what He has done for "ME". Through this, each Christian is maturing his inner worship life to focus solely on God rather than himself. What are we giving ourselves to if not God? If we come to worship (into God's presence) with any other purpose, any other intent of the heart but to praise the God of history, our Creator and Redeemer, simply because he deserves it and we were meant for it, if we come of our own doing and strength and not in faith, if we come with desires in our hearts that focus on ourselves and not just to love and admire the living God, we have failed to worship. So we are urged "by the mercies of God, to present (our) bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is (our) spiritual service of WORSHIP" (Romans 12:1).

We first address individual worship because corporate worship experiences are a reflection of hearts wholly devoted to God. What distinguishes Christian worship from other monotheistic religions is God-centered praise based on the life we have in Christ (Psalm 63:1-6) . Corporate worship brings the local church together to involve worshipping individuals collectively in the function of worship - to glorify God in song, prayer, exhortation, offering and other such means and to celebrate Christ and His life via meditation, the Lord's supper and other activities and, at times, to receive many of God's gifts such as salvation, forgiveness and peace. Thus corporate worship at Grace Covenant is the community of believers coming together to give reverence to God by celebrating Christ's work for us and to allow the non-believers in our midst to witness our awe of His saving grace. It is to be an active, vital time of personal and community participation with God through praise, prayer and the reception of and response to the Word (Acts 2:42). Worship is to be focused on God in Christ (Psalm 29:9 "In his temple everything says, 'Glory'"), participated in and united by the Holy Spirit so that one comes with a sense of preparation and expectation, participates fully both individually and corporately and leaves refreshed and ready to act on God's behalf.

Corporate worship in our culture traditionally flows better with a form or expression, the simplest of which would include a time of preparation and corporate gathering, praise through song, reading or reflection, the Word of God, our response to the Word including tithes and offering and a dismissal in preparation to return to the world. However, form is not mandated in the Bible and thus is open to different expressions. Since neither function nor form are what we worship, God has left these to the Holy Spirit in us to develop various worship expressions which encourages individual worship and helps lead each person into the presence of God in a corporate setting.

MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

The role of music in the Church has changed throughout the history of time, reflecting many extremes in its use and function among God's people.

Before 70 AD, the earliest church did not use music in their worship, with the exception of the singing of psalms - which was not very widespread. Many church historians such as Eusebius documented that the early church gathered regularly to hear a sermon, participate in group prayer, read from Scripture, take a collection for the needy, and other practices that were eventually banned due to abuses (i.e. agape feasts and exchanging the kiss of peace.) While chanting was a common Jewish practice, it wasn't until the Middle Ages that chanting - such as Gregorian chants - became formalized. These chants were done in unison (no harmony) and were not congregational. Only the monks and the priests chanted, while the congregation listened.

Music in the church as we understand it today didn't happen until the reformation. Martin Luther took beer hall songs and changed the words to reflect a Christian message. Likewise, Charles Wesley took popular tunes and put Christian lyrics to them. Both of these men faced considerable opposition for doing such as many in the church resisted the melding of secular music with sacred lyrics. In addition, it was around this period that the use of an organ in church services was considered scandalous, though it was a practice that slowly gained acceptance. All of these new forms garnered major resistance from many in the established church. Some embraced the hymns, some refused - which often caused dissension that contributed to church splits. While the practice of using hymns in corporate worship has only been in place for about 500 years, most modern Christians consider hymns the traditional form of music in the church. If the standard of tradition were applied to all of church history, however, the definition of traditional music would include much more than hymns that were written from the fourteenth century to present.

Many in North American evangelical circles assume that music and worship are synonymous; that singing is worship and worship is singing. The complete history of the Christian church - and in fact Jewish history - dispute such a notion. The early church worshipped with little or no music. David worshipped after his infant son died (2 Sam. 12:20); Abraham worshipped by sacrificing his son (Gen. 22-5); Job worshipped in the face of great suffering (Job 1:20). All three of these men (and countless others) entered into a profound worship experience with God without the use of music.

The use of music in its proper context, however, is both biblical and helpful in the expression of worship. It is a tool ordained by God to give expression to the meditations of the heart, and offers the worshiper a private or public opportunity to dethrone self and ascribe supreme value and importance to Jesus Christ. Singing a spiritual song does not constitute worship unless it is an accurate reflection of the posture that is already being held in the singers' heart. Music is not worship; rather, it is one expression of our worship.

At the very core, worship reflects theological belief, and theological belief determines form. For example, the Church of Christ believes that the human voice is the only acceptable instrument in the worship of God, thus their church services are conducted without the use of any instruments. In similar fashion, the theological beliefs of many in Luther's and Wesley's day caused them to oppose the proliferation of many of the hymns that are considered classic and traditional today, and that belief dictated what they would and would not allow in their services. Likewise, our theological beliefs will determine our form. For the past 30 years, music in the church has been changing enormously - much to the same degree as happened at the reformation. It is necessary and good to discuss preferences and needs in regards to form, but it is imperative that the church not focus on musical form to the exclusion of continually examining the posture of the worshiper's heart. Musical form is not what determines a true worship experience - a heart in loving submission and fearful deference to God is what will ultimately determine the quality of one's worship.

TYPES OF MUSIC IN WORSHIP

The following is a summary of an article from the July 1999 issue of *Church Musician Today* which was adapted from Exalt His Name Together by Mark D. Edwards.

More descriptive than definitive, five styles of worship can be differentiated rather easily; however, hard and fast lines cannot be drawn between them because there are too many gray areas between any two.

Liturgical

This form of worship looks to God's work in history, through recalling by example, in how He dealt with people in the past and toward anticipation of His work among people today. Words like "awe", "majesty" and "holiness" describe the view of God.

Music in the liturgical setting also anchors to history. It is the classics which have withstood the test of time. The typical, sole accompanying instrument is the organ. Most of the music is precise and will not be readily appreciated by the masses (which is okay) as it is more important that the music is offered as a gift to God – who deserves the best. The hymnal will be used extensively and majestic hymns about God and Jesus are emphasized. There will be few opportunities for singing about personal faith experiences.

Traditional

The atmosphere for a traditional worship service is not as formal as that of liturgical as the distance between God and man is not emphasized as much as in liturgical worship. There is more comfort in claiming the nearness of God in everyday life and even though there is a recognition of God's work in history, recent history and the present are also given attention.

Music in traditional worship includes the classics but more current music is also used if it is crafted very well. The organ will be the primary instrument, but the piano may also be used from time to time. Majestic hymns and gospel songs are sung from the hymnal. It is likely that people will identify more with the music than in liturgical worship given the introduction of the personal element.

Blended

This type of service usually occurs in churches which have a history of traditional worship, but feel a need to update form without forsaking its roots. Consistent with this style is the belief that God's work in history must be remembered, but of equal importance is His activity in the world today.

Music is varied, incorporating new material with that which has been around for a number of years. This blending is seen in what the choir presents, what instruments are played and what the congregations sing – classic hymns, gospel songs, new choruses, old anthems, contemporary songs and so forth. In the blended style, the organ shares its prominence with the piano, electronic keyboard, or any mixture of wind, brass, stringed and percussion instruments. Blended means that music from both traditional and praise/worship will be used. This will necessitate having adaptable accompanists who adjust stylistically, and who will be content not playing on some pieces of music.

Praise/Worship

This style of worship focuses on God with words like "holy", "majesty", and "high and lifted up" that prevail throughout the service. Praise/worship differs from the liturgical in that the language is addressed more directly to God than about God and is more personal than plural. History is not as important as the present.

Music is mostly new material with the occasional use of an old hymn. Words to songs projected on a screen usually replace the hymnal or the words are printed in the bulletin. Congregational singing may consist of many choruses and/or parts of hymns strung thematically together in an extended time of uninterrupted singing. Accompanying instruments are typically electronic keyboards, guitars, drums and any assortment of wind instruments. Many churches utilizing this style have full orchestras.

Seeker-Sensitive

This style is aimed at the unchurched, and more specifically, the baby boomers and GenX. The seeker-sensitive service is gentle, easy-flowing and a non-threatening presentation of the gospel. It reflects the passive nature of the television generation in regard to congregational participation and calls for personal, not corporate, response. The service content is down-to-earth and practical.

Music reflects secular forms and sounds in its dynamic level, tempo, beat and emotion. If worshipers are encouraged to sing along, words are projected onto a screen or in the bulletin. The music is simple and usually deals with a single idea. A few singers holding individual microphones lead in singing and replace the choir. A small ensemble of keyboards, guitars, drums and maybe a wind instrument or two accompanies the music. Other elements, like drama, are often included with the music.

CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP AT GRACE COVENANT A Praise/Worship Service

The Church has seen many changes in worship forms over the past 30 years – some good, some bad. One of the most visible changes has been the preference for and proliferation of contemporary music, especially among the young adult age group. Beginning in 1995, Grace Covenant began to see a large growth spurt in the area of college students and young married couples.

As the number of people in this age group increased, so did the overall congregational desire for more contemporary music during the worship service as this new generation of believers comprised a more significant portion of the congregation.

The fundamental basis for the development of a Contemporary Worship Service follows from our overall theology of worship as described in a preceding document. However, the guiding principles are not just contemporary expressions, but rather are drawn not only from tradition, the historical and first century assemblies of believers, but also from the worship forms and practices of the Hebrew people as described in the scriptures.

One of the goals of the Contemporary Worship Service is to worship God corporately by offering an environment that enables the assembly of believers to worship through culturally relevant and authentic means, with emphasis on individual worship (everyone participates) within a congregational setting. The music expression includes a variety of contemporary praise and worship songs accompanied by keyboards, guitars, percussion, brass, woodwind and other stringed instruments, together and in part.

Conceptually, this format is based upon the example from the Old Testament of entering into the presence of God through the temple gate, the Outer Court, the Holy Place and into the Holy of Holies. This Old Testament example is linked to the New Testament, not only through Jesus Christ as our High Priest, but also through our position in Christ as priests. The slower, more reflective and personal music and song toward God at the end of our worship music sets can be likened to entering into the Holy of Holies (the presence of God) as we are told we have access in the scriptures. These transitions from upbeat praise songs (through the gate and Outer Court) to more moderate tempos (Holy Place) and then to slow, reflective and personal tempos (Holy of Holies) help prepare us to hear and receive the Word of God through the preaching or teaching of our pastor. The preaching of the Word and the hearing and receiving of it can be likened to being in the physical presence of God himself as the High Priest was in the Holy of Holies.