

## Pillar I

### *Honor God with biblical and excellent worship that engages both mind and affections*

The church's highest priority is worship. While evangelism and missions are limited to our time in this fallen world, worship will reach into eternity ( I Peter 2:9ff; Ephesians 1:12). The Westminster Shorter Catechism rightly points out: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

The word worship comes from the old English word "worthscipe" which expressed the idea of attributing worth to something or someone. When we worship God we acknowledge that He is intrinsically valuable. In other words, we worship God for the simple fact that He is worthy.

Worship is the privilege and glad duty of every Christian. We worship God by seeking His glory alone in everything we do (Rom 12:1; I Cor 10:31). It is an offering not merely of words but of our very lives to God. William Temple offers this excellent definition:

Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose – and all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.

In addition to the individual element, worship is also to be understood in strongly corporate terms (Col 3:16-17). We are to proclaim the greatness and glory of God to one another. Worship "is the covenant community engaging with God, gathering with his people to seek the face of God, to glorify and enjoy Him, to hear His Word, to revel in the glory of union and communion with Him, to respond to His Word, to render praise back to Him, to give unto Him the glory due His name"<sup>1</sup>

J. Ligon Duncan points to a biblical framework of doctrines that form a foundation for Christian worship.<sup>2</sup>

- The nature of God – Who God is, is the number one determining factor regarding how we worship. The first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex 20:3) finds its rationale simply in the fact that God is and is worthy of worship. The second commandment's prohibition against the use of images in worship flows directly from the fact that God cannot be adequately pictured (Deut 4:15-19; John 4:24). Our worship of God is to reinforce our knowledge of and love for God and therefore must be informed by what the Bible teaches about God.

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<sup>1</sup> Duncan, J.L. (editor) *Give Praise to God* (Phillipsburg: P&R) p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 57ff

- The Creator-creature distinction – God created all there is. We are not co-creators with God nor is He contained within what He has made (Ps 100:3). The Bible upholds and celebrates the distinction between God and His creation. God is wholly and holy other from man (Isaiah 6:1-3). Since God is entirely distinct from us and by nature transcendent and incomprehensible apart from His own self-disclosure, how can we properly worship Him unless guided by what He tells us in the Bible?
- The idea of revelation – This point builds directly upon the former. “Biblical worship inherently entails a response to revelation” (p. 54). We cannot know God unless He willingly reveals Himself to us. In this post-apostolic time God reveals Himself chiefly through His Word. General knowledge of God may be discerned from creation (Rom 1:20) but redemptive knowledge of God requires the revelation of Jesus Christ found in the Bible (Rom 10:14-17). Divine revelation is essential for worship to be proper and honoring to God. Worship embodies a kind of dialogue with God revealing and man responding. “God takes initiative in worship through revelation, promise, and blessing. His people respond in worship through hearing, believing, and praise/adoration/confession/thanksgiving” (p. 55).
- The unchanging moral law of God – The second commandment (Ex 20:4) forbids the use of any images of God in worship. The broader principle to be inferred in this commandment is that we must not introduce into worship anything that God forbids. It is also important to note that this command finds itself not in the temporary ceremonial laws of Israel but the eternal moral law of God. The sons of Aaron were struck dead by God for offering “strange fire” on the altar (Lev 10:1-2). Every indication from the passage is that they were trying to worship the right God but doing so in the wrong way.
- The nature of faith – John Owen, the greatest of the Puritan theologians stated quite convincingly “the argument of faith.” The idea is that since faith is necessary to true worship then right worship is conditioned upon the exercise of true faith. Faith is confident belief in what God has said (Heb 11:1). What is more, the Bible tells us that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb 11:6) and “whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). God will not be honored by a worship that is not characterized by confidence in God and His Word.
- The doctrine of carefulness – The worship of God’s people described in the pages of Scripture was characterized by reverence and sometimes outright fear. Where God’s presence was rightly recognized and sin properly reckoned with the people responded in trembling and face-to-the-ground humility. How different this is from the “keep it casual” coffee shop approach to worship in the contemporary church. In Scripture, when God’s clear instructions were disregarded there was a high price to pay. Uzzah was struck dead for not treating the Ark of the Covenant as God had commanded (II Sam 6). The story of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-2) referenced earlier seems odd, even cruel in a church culture that reveres creativity, “outside the box” thinking, and good intentions. “God is dangerous to those who are careless in worship, however sincere... The way of carefulness is the way of the Word” (p. 57).
- The church’s authority – The church’s authority is of a derivative nature. Jesus is the sole head of the church. Any authority that the church possesses is derived from her Lord and Savior. The officers of the church as defined by Scripture (Eph 4:11-13) have no power to make their own laws but must only serve to administer the rule of

Christ as revealed in the Bible. The church has no authority to require obedience to its own commands or “participation in ordinances of its own making” (p. 57). The church is required however to hold forth the commands and ordinances of God as revealed in Scripture.

- The doctrine of Christian freedom – Only Scripture can truly protect Christian freedom. The Bible tells us that while we must act in sacrificial love toward one another our conscience is held captive to God alone (Rom 14:1-4; I Cor 10:23-30; Gal 4:8-11; Col 2:16-23). We must not submit to or require others to submit to man-made worship regulations. By showing us God’s priorities for worship the Bible guarantees our freedom from the bondage to human doctrines and practices. Christian freedom means that we are not required to render any act in corporate worship that God, in His Word, has not called for.
- The nature of personal holiness and obedience – Scripture tells us that “to obey is better than sacrifice” (I Sam 15:22). King Saul found this out the hard way. If we are to obey all that God has commanded then a deep and adoring knowledge of Scripture is essential for it is in the pages of God’s Word alone that we discover what He has commanded.
- The tendency of mankind toward idolatry – Worship must “not be according to the imaginations or devices of men.” Our hearts are idol factories as Calvin observed. Of idolatry, Luther wrote, “we are inclined to it by nature; and coming to us by inheritance, it seems pleasant.” It is clear in Romans 1:19-25 that fallen man is a degenerate truth twister. It is in our nature to distort whatever knowledge of God we receive. This is why Wesley observed that “every man born into this world is a rank idolater.” Our tendency toward idolatry extends not only to the potential objects of our worship but to the very way in which we worship. There were times in Israel’s history (and perhaps today?) when God’s people attempted to worship God in their own way or to adapt their worship practices to cultural norms. Scripture strictly forbids this (Deut 12:29-32).

There are four principles that guide Metro East as preparations are made for our corporate worship gatherings:

### **1. Worship must be guided by God’s Word.**

“The Bible provides us with God’s directions for the form and content of Christian worship.”<sup>3</sup> God never encourages us to worship Him in any way we happen to prefer. Unfortunately, many prominent pastors and church leaders today teach that the form and elements of our worship are neutral and can be changed to meet current cultural expectations. This idea carries with it two deeply flawed assumptions: 1) Form and content are completely unrelated and 2) God has no preferences regarding how He is to be worshiped.

The Old Testament says much more than the New Testament about structures of corporate worship. However, some have erroneously concluded that the New Testament is silent on issues of corporate worship. While it is true that the New Covenant in Christ brought radical changes, these changes did not cast away corporate worship as a mandate

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 51

for God's people. It is important to affirm this because of the presence of serious voices within evangelicalism that hold the opinion that all elements and structures of corporate worship were simply temporary arrangements under the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant, they reason, worship has become strictly a lifestyle that defines how we approach our vocation, treat our neighbors and family, recreate, etc. and has nothing to do with corporate structures or meetings. The argument continues that the New Testament church does not gather for the purpose of worship at all but rather for fellowship, preaching, and prayer. And while those elements are certainly vital to the church's life they are not separate from corporate worship but rather elements of it. Worship is indeed a lifestyle and should find expression in all of life. The New Testament explodes any notion that worship is confined to particular times and places. But nowhere does the New Testament call God's people away from organized and thoughtful corporate worship.

*Worship is the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Christian Church. It alone will endure, like the love for God which it expresses, into heaven, when all other activities of the Church will have passed away. It must therefore, even more strictly than any of the less essential doings of the Church, come under the criticism and control of the revelation on which the Church is founded.*

- W. Nicholls

### **Biblical elements of Christian worship:**

- Music and singing  
Psalm 95:1; 98:1; Acts 2:47; Eph 5:19-20; Col 3:16
- Prayer  
Acts 2:42; 4:24-30; 12:5, 12
- Preaching and teaching God's Word  
Acts 2:42, 46; 5:20-21; 11:25-26; 18:11; 19:9-10; 20:7, 20-21
- The Lord's Supper  
Matt 26:17-30; Luke 22:19; I Cor 10:16-17; 11:17-34
- Edification  
I Cor 14; Heb 10:24-25
- Orderliness  
I Cor 12-14

### **2. Worship must engage the mind with biblical truth with an eye to increasing our affections for and devotion to God.**

Worship is intellectual. That statement is taboo in a church culture that prizes subjective spiritual experience over matters of the mind. Don't misunderstand, worship is not confined to the mind but it certainly must begin there. How can our hearts properly revel in what we do not understand? Worship begins with facts: Who God is, what God is like, what God has done. God reveals these things to us in the Bible. Worship therefore begins with the revelatory initiative of God and continues with our response of praise and thanks. God is not interested in outward forms of worship that do not engage the heart and result in glad obedience. "This people honors Me with their lips but their heart is far from Me" (Matt 15:8). "To obey is better than sacrifice" (I Sam 15:22). C.S. Lewis rightly observed that we do not properly honor that which we do not enjoy.

### **3. Songs must focus on God's attributes and His redemptive plan accomplished in Jesus Christ.**

Christian music is for and about God. True, worship is strongly edifying in that we are to encourage one another and spur each other on to greater love and obedience. But it is the proper honoring of God that provides the rationale for this edification. We encourage one another toward greater holiness because God is holy. We are to strive to be more loving because God is love. We are to forgive each other because God in Christ has forgiven us. All of the Christian virtues find their reason in the character of God. Therefore, our worship must be focused on God's attributes as a means to both honor Him and exhort one another.

In addition to affirming the many attributes of God, Christian worship is incoherent if it does not include a strong Gospel orientation. How can a redeemed people not sing of their Redeemer and the means of their redemption? So worship is a grand rehearsal of the themes of the Gospel: the perfect obedience, atoning death, and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners.

### **4. Congregational singing is stressed above performance.**

In His kindness God has given Metro East many gifted musicians and singers. Each Sunday we are blessed by brothers and sisters who lead us in singing God-exalting and edifying songs. Often times we are encouraged by vocal or instrumental solos that help us reflect on biblical truths concerning God and the Gospel. This is a good thing and will, by God's grace, continue to be a part of the corporate gatherings of Metro East. However, the stress in our corporate worship will always weigh heavily toward congregational singing. God's people must not be passive observers as they gather for worship. Neither should we allow our gatherings to breed a performance culture. Through music we love to confess God's marvelous truth together.

#### **\* A Postscript concerning music:**

God has ordained music and singing for the purpose of His praise. The Scriptures are full of exhortations to God's people to sing and make music for the Lord. This is a blessing. God was gracious when He gave us the means of music that we might use to honor Him. But Scripture is clear that music in our worship is for two purposes: to honor God and to edify our fellow believers. This is important to understand because in the contemporary church, music has been vested with powers that God never bestows upon it.

One example (and there are many) of this misunderstanding of the purpose of music specifically and worship in general comes from the flyer of a recent conference:

*Join us for dynamic teaching to set you on the right path, and inspiring worship where you can meet God and receive the energy and love you need to be a mover and shaker in today's world...Alongside our teaching program are worship events which put you in touch with the power and love of God.*

Churches routinely advertise their "life-changing" or "dynamic" worship that will "bring you closer to God" or "change your life." Certain worship CD's promise that the music will "enable you to enter the presence of God." These kinds of promises reveal a

dangerous theological error. Worship, i.e. singing, is viewed as a means to facilitate an encounter with God; it will move us closer to God. This is, at best a sub-Christian view. At worst, it is heresy.

Jesus is the only way to God. He is the sole mediator between God and man. The popular but mistaken notions regarding worship music betray this foundational truth of the Christian faith. They offer music and “the worship experience” as an additional mediator between God and man. They would deny this by insisting that they believe Jesus to be the only way to salvation. But they would be hard pressed to find any biblical support for the idea that music mediates direct encounters or experiences with God. This is a common pagan notion. It is far from Christian.

Vaughan Roberts offers four consequences of viewing music as an encounter with God. I will summarize them.<sup>4</sup>

### **1. God’s Word is marginalized.**

In many Churches and Christian gatherings it is not unusual for God’s Word to be shortchanged. Music gives people the elusive “liver quiver” while the Bible is more mundane. But faith does not come from music, dynamic experiences, or supposed encounters with God. Faith is birthed through the means of God’s Word (Rom 10:17).

### **2. Our assurance is threatened.**

If we associate God’s presence with a particular experience or emotion, what happens when we no longer feel it? We search for churches whose praise band, orchestra, or pipe organ produce in us the feelings we are chasing after. But the reality of God in our lives depends on the mediation of Christ not on subjective experiences.

### **3. Musicians are given priestly status.**

When music is seen as a means to encounter God, worship leaders and musicians are vested with a priestly role. They become the ones who bring us into the presence of God rather than Jesus Christ who alone has already fulfilled that role. Understandably, when a worship leader or band doesn’t help me experience God they have failed and must be replaced. On the other hand, when we believe that they have successfully moved us into God’s presence they will attain in our minds a status that is far too high for their own good.

### **4. Division is increased.**

If we identify a feeling as an encounter with God, and only a particular kind of music produces that feeling, then we will insist that same music be played regularly in our church or gatherings. As long as everyone else shares our taste then there is no problem. But if others depend upon a different kind of music to produce the feeling that is important to them then division is cultivated. And because we routinely classify particular feelings as encounters with God our demands for what produce those feelings become very rigid. This is why so many churches succumb to offering multiple styles of worship services. By doing so, they unwittingly sanction division and self-centeredness

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<sup>4</sup> Roberts, Vaughn, *True Worship* ( ) pp. 59ff.

among the people of God. Like a Burger King customer the church attendee is encouraged to “have it your way.”

Works Cited and otherwise consulted:

Give Praise to God edited by Ryken, Thomas, and Duncan

True Worship by Vaughan Roberts

Engaging with God by David Peterson

I Believe in the Church by David Watson