

WORSHIP THAT PROCLAIMS THE
GOSPEL

BY DAN KREIDER

TABLE OF CONTENTS

What does it mean to worship God?	1
How does the Bible describe worship?	4
Songs that proclaim the Gospel	10
Worship services that proclaim the Gospel	14
Ministry that proclaims the Gospel	18

What Does it Mean to “Worship” God?

Clearly, worship matters to God. The psalm writers call us again and again to worship the Lord (Psalm 29:2, 95:6, 96:9, 99:5). When Jesus rebuked Satan in the wilderness, he told him, “You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve” (Matthew 4:10). And Jesus said in John 4:23-24, “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.”

We may use the word “worship,” but what does it actually mean? And how should we understand the command to “worship the Lord”?

When we want to know what we ought to do from the Scriptures, there are two approaches we must use to shape our understanding. The first is *systematic theology*, which describes what the whole Bible says about a subject in its entirety. The second is *biblical theology*, which means going to a specific portion of Scripture and understanding what the text says. As we ask the question “What does it mean to worship God?”, we need to look at individual passages *and* at the Bible as a whole.

In the Old Testament, there are several different Hebrew words that indicate worship of God. One sense is “to bow down” or “to adore” (Ex. 12:27, Psalm 95:6). The second is “to serve” (Ex. 23:25, Psalm 100:2). Israel was commanded to worship the Lord, and the most obvious way they were to do this was to obey his law. So there was certainly a sense in which Israel’s worship was a personal, continual action. In Amos 5:21-23, God says that He hates the offerings that His people were bringing to Him, and this is because they were not living holy lives. So there is a clear connection in the Old Testament between the temple offerings and the holy living of the people.

But the main emphasis of worship (or adoration) in the Old Testament was it took place at a *certain time and place with certain people*. God’s presence was in the temple, in the Most Holy Place, and God spoke to His people at certain times. Of course God has always existed everywhere, but these certain places and times were when He visited His people in an unmistakable way. And not only were the time and place specific, but also the audience was

limited. Only the High Priest went into the Most Holy Place, and he had to be an Israelite, of the tribe of Levi. So the worship of God was primarily about a time, a place, and an event.

The New Testament also shows two ideas to understand worship that parallel the ideas in the Old Testament. The first, "to bow down" or "to fall down," is the Greek word *proskuneo*. It occurs many times in the Gospels (for example, Matt. 2:11, Luke 24:52, John 9:38). It also occurs several times in Revelation (Rev. 5:14). This is the idea of adoration, of praise. It is accompanied by a posture of reverence and devotion. But it is very important to point out that the word *proskuneo* is absent from the Epistles (that is, the age of the church, which we are in right now). Instead we find the second idea, "to serve" (the Greek word *latrueo*).

Why is *proskuneo* absent from the Epistles? The answer is found in John 4:19-24. Here Jesus is speaking with the woman at the well. He has just pointed out her sin, and she wants to change the subject by talking about locations where people should worship. Jesus answers her question in a way she did not expect. Instead of worshiping at a certain place, Jesus tells the woman that there is a time coming soon when true worshipers will worship God "in spirit and in truth."

By saying this, Jesus was changing the Jews' understanding of worship. He was calling them away from worship that was focused on a centralized location and displayed by a ceremony. Instead, he was making worship internal, continual, and affecting all of life.

This was not totally new. God had always been calling his people to obey with their lives, not just with ceremonies and rituals. But the difference is that, in the church age, the temple is no longer a building. Jesus said in Matthew 12:6, "Something greater than the temple is here." He was referring to himself! He was looking forward to the time that he himself would live inside believers through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is not bodily present with us today, but now our *bodies* are the temple of God (1 Cor. 6:19-20)! The veil of the temple has been torn in two. There is no more wall of separation: now Christ lives in our hearts through faith (Eph. 3:17).

Because of this truth, how do we understand worship in the New Testament church today? There are several applications:

1. God's presence is always with us, since the Holy Spirit lives inside us. At salvation, we receive the full indwelling of the Spirit. Hebrews 13:5 promises that God will never leave us. So while we can and should pray for the Lord's bodily return, it's not really accurate to pray that God's presence would "come to us" – He is already here!
2. Unlike the Old Testament, our worship of God is not primarily about meeting on Sunday. It's true that we are commanded to meet together, and we should not neglect it. But the focus of believers meeting in the New Testament is all about building one another up. As we sing to one another, pray together, listen to God's Word being taught, and fellowship with the Lord's Supper, we are building each other up in our faith.
3. The overwhelming sense of worship is now about *faithful service* and *constant holy living*. Whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do... worship the Lord (1 Cor. 10:31). Submit your bodies to God, don't think like the world thinks, and renew your mind – all of this is your "reasonable service" (Romans 12:1-2). When you serve the body of Christ, you are worshiping the Lord. In fact, every pursuit and everything you do can be done as an act of adoration. This view of worship intensifies everything. There is no difference between the secular and the sacred. For the Christian, every bush is a burning bush, and all ground is holy ground.

As you think about these realities, rejoice that your worship of God is not limited to a certain time and place. Worship the Lord by obeying His commands and serving fellow believers. And eagerly look forward to the day when our faith becomes sight, and we bow down before the Lord in his bodily presence!

How Does the Bible Describe Worship?

We have begun to form a definition of “worship” from Scripture, but what should our corporate worship look like? Since the New Testament gives almost no specifics for worship services, are there biblical principles that can guide our decision-making when we are planning corporate worship? Here are nine essential principles from Scripture. Later we’ll make more detailed application for how these principles inform our services.

1. Worship is first God revealing Himself to man, and then man responding to God.

Before man responds to God, God first reveals Himself to man. This order is displayed throughout Scripture, from God seeking Adam in the garden (Gen. 3:9) to God tearing the veil of the temple from *top to bottom* (Matt. 27:51). God has always been the one that initiates. Paul writes that the invisible attributes of God are plainly displayed in creation, so what can be known about God is plain to mankind; and mankind is without excuse (Rom. 1:19-20).

The account of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in I Kings 18 gives us a valuable story that models the order of events in worship. This event is not primarily about Elijah, or even about false worship – it is about God revealing Himself to His people and receiving worship for who He is. Elijah’s prayer reveals the purpose of God’s actions: “Let it be known that You are God in Israel!” Immediately God displays His power, and the people worship Him. This is the model for worship: God *first* shows who He is, and then His people respond in worship.

Application

There are three applications we can draw from this. First, our primary audience in worship is God. In everything we do, we seek to be approved by God. Our primary consideration is never the opinions or approval of man.

Secondly, it is not the main job of the song leader to be inspiring or to excite the congregation. It is the job of the leadership merely to say, “Here is God – worship Him!”

Third, how do we decide when to make changes in our services, and what changes to make? We should make changes only if they will reveal God more clearly, or help believers respond in a more biblical way.

2. *Worship must begin with the person and work of God.*

In Romans 12:1, Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God, which is your spiritual worship.” But it is important to see that this command comes after eleven chapters of doctrinal truth. Paul is instructing believers to worship God, but only after he has first explained to them what they already are in Christ.

Christ’s model prayer begins with a statement of worship: “Our Father in heaven, may your name be hallowed” (Matt. 6:9). When God made His covenant with the children of Israel, He continually punctuated His commands with a reminder of who He was: “I am the LORD” (Lev. 19). The beginning of all things – especially our worship – is the person of God. Charles Spurgeon puts it this way:

See how the Bible opens: "In the beginning God." Let your life open in the same way. Seek with your whole soul, first and foremost, the kingdom of God as the place of your citizenship, and His righteousness as the character of your life. As for the rest, it will come from the LORD Himself without your being anxious concerning it. All that is needful for this life and godliness "shall be added unto you."

Application

Corporate praise and adoration are based on acknowledging *who God is* (His character) and *what He does* (His actions). Worship must begin by presenting the excellence of God, or it will be powerless.

A second application is that emotion is a result of content, not the reverse. Here is the order of events:

Right Thinking ⇔ Right Actions ⇔ Right Emotion

Another way to understand this sequence is:

Believe ⇔ Obey ⇔ Feel

3. *Worship must be on God’s terms.*

In Genesis 4, we see that God accepted Abel’s offering but rejected Cain’s. When the Israelites brought the ark back from the Philistines on a cart, God displayed His anger at their

disobedience (2 Sam. 6). And in the book of Malachi, God rejected offerings that did not meet His standards (chapter 1). Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly says that His people must come to Him on His terms – not on theirs. The entire Mosaic law refutes the thinking of our contemporary culture which claims that we can define truth based on our own perspective and preferences. God is the one who defines truth.

Application

God is calling His people to worship in a way that is based on an external and changeless source of truth. There is some worship God does not accept. It is only the rebellious who think they can approach God on their own terms. Purity is more important than mere participation, because our worship will reveal what we think of God.

Second, we must model our worship from Scripture, not from worldly culture. We cannot rely merely on what works or what is comfortable or popular – and we should not make decisions based primarily on the desires of the congregation. We must always ask, “God, how do you want us to worship You?”

4. Worship is a choice.

When Job received the news of his children’s death, he certainly did not *feel* like worshiping God. But that is exactly what he did – falling on his face and proclaiming, not only “the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away,” but also: “Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). In his moment of great grief, he *chose* to give praise and honor to the God who gives and takes away. Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 makes this same choice: *I will* sing with my spirit, and *I will* sing with my mind also.”

Application

Worship is an action, not an emotion. All worship, whether private or corporate, must begin with an act of the will – a choice to worship God regardless of feelings or circumstances. No amount of preparation or emotional appeal on the part of the worship leader can *make* a congregation worship God if they are unwilling.

5. Worship must be sacrificial.

God demanded sacrificial worship from Abraham. “Take your son, your only son Isaac, *whom you love...*” (Gen 22:2). David also displayed sacrificial worship when he was commanded to build an altar on the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite. When Arunah offered the

threshing floor to David as a gift, David refused to take it without paying what it was worth, saying, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24).

God wants worship from His people that is sacrificial and complete. When asked to name the greatest command, Jesus said plainly, "Love God – with all your heart, soul, and mind" (Matt. 22:37). Jesus was essentially saying, *Love God with all that you are*. Love Him with every part of your being. Don't love God *only* with your mind, or with your heart: to love like this is to compartmentalize your relationship with Him. God must be worshipped with the whole of our being, or not at all.

Application

We must bring our best to worship the Lord, not offerings that are blind or lame. Every aspect of our worship must be planned and rehearsed with careful, purposeful preparation, for we are offering it to the God of the universe.

A second application is that corporate worship is about what we can *give*, not what we can *get*. We must reject modern consumerism that criticizes every mistake and every wrong note. We do not come to church to be entertained or pleased – we come to bring a sacrifice of praise to God, "even as the Son of Man came *not to be served, but to serve...*" (Matt. 20:28).

A final application is that worship is *active*, not *passive*. I cannot speak for churches in the Czech Republic, but the majority of evangelical American Christianity has adopted a worship model that is very performance-driven. Many churches that have moved to a performer-audience model have tried to maintain at least an appearance of honoring God in their planning and congregational participation in their music, but much of it is really just entertainment. The reason for this is a failure to understand the real *source* of worship (which is God's revelation to us) and the *nature* of worship (active and sacrificial).

Because every believer is now a priest in the New Covenant, each of us should participate in the worship service, not watch other people do it for us! If worship becomes the responsibility of an individual or chosen group, we lose personal accountability for responding to God's revelation. Worship becomes a noun when it ought to be a verb. This really isn't about any one kind of musical style or type of service. It reveals the heart of man – self-glorification through performance. But throughout Scripture, the words *worship*, *service*, and *sacrifice* are used almost synonymously. The principle is this: *worship is a sacrificial, personal act directed towards God*.

6. *Worship should unify, not divide.*

The Book of Acts displays a number of examples that show how worshipping God together unites believers. After a worship service in Acts 4, the text says that the believers were united with “one heart and one mind.” It goes on to say that this unity displayed itself in acts of generosity and self-denial (Acts 4:23-32). In Revelation, we see an amazing picture of worship around the throne, “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...” (Rev. 7:9). The act and object of their worship is what unifies them. It should be this way on earth as it is in heaven!

Application

God never intended musical or cultural preferences to be a source of division. God wants His people to be of one heart and one mind *in the gospel*. Music is an area in which believers should exercise liberty in a spirit of love. We should be broad where the Scripture is broad and narrow where the Scripture is narrow. Many churches in America offer multiple services with different styles of music in each one. Bob Kauflin says wisely, “When we can’t sing in the same room together, we are saying that music’s power to divide us is greater than the gospel’s power to unite us.”

7. *Worship must stir the spirit and engage the mind* (1 Corinthians 14.13-25).

Paul states in 1 Corinthians 14.15: “I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing praise with my mind also.” This context of this statement is a discussion of the use of tongues in the church, but Paul’s larger point is that our worship must stir the spirit and engage the mind. Compare this to Jesus’ command to love God with every aspect of our being – will, mind, and emotion. It is not enough for our worship to be only emotional – or only intellectual. It should encompass and balance both aspects.

8. *Worship must be motivated by an overflow of the Word* (Colossians 3.16).

In Colossians 3, we are commanded to allow the Word of Christ to live in us until it overflows – and the result will be worship. This is also a wonderful picture of worship that is engaging the mind with truth. Immersion in the Word will produce singing that proclaims truth and encourages holy living. Worship that does not find its source and substance in Scriptural truth will be powerless – because worship begins with the person and work of God!

9. *Worship must be spirit-controlled* (Ephesians 5.18-19).

In Ephesians 5, we are shown the effects of being controlled with the Spirit: musical worship that is both external (“speaking to one another”) and internal (“with your heart”). From this passage we can make two applications.

First, the Spirit of God must be present in our worship. The Greek word for “spirit” means “current or breath of air.” This is a striking picture, for it illustrates powerfully the difference between a stagnant pool and a flowing stream – pictures of worship that may be either dead and lifeless or infused with the life and breath of God. It is not a misapplication of the text to say that corporate worship should feel, or else it will be lifeless and powerless. But at the same time, emotion is not the primary objective – nor should we try to simply create an experience. Joyful singing is a by-product of being filled with the Spirit, which comes through obedience and faith.

Secondly, both this passage and previous passage in Colossians 3 assume singing is a command – and a natural result of the Word and the Spirit. There are no exception clauses for those who don’t enjoy music, or for whom singing is awkward or embarrassing. The priesthood of every believer compels him or her to actively participate in worship, not passively observe.

Now that we’ve looked at biblical principles for worship, let’s look at how we can apply them specifically to our church services and worship in the life of the church family.

Songs That Proclaim the Gospel

In John 2, we are given the account of Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple with a whip. As He smashed their tables and sent them running in terror, Jesus called after them, “Take these things away! Do not make my Father’s house a house of trade!” This picture of divine anger illustrates an important fact: *worship matters to God*. If this is true, it is essential that believers discern what music we ought to use in corporate and private worship.

We’ll talk more about the big picture of the service time later, but for now let’s operate under the assumption that services are times where believers meet to pray together, sing together, and hear God’s Word proclaimed. The most distinctive part of our services, and maybe the most immediately obvious, is the songs we choose.

What does it mean for songs to proclaim the Gospel? And what questions should we ask when we decide what songs we will sing as a church?

Is it true?

The first and most obvious requirement for a song is that it must be *true*. Of course no one would sing a song that proclaimed “Jesus isn’t God!” But neither should we assume that just because a song is popular or well-known, it’s guaranteed to be accurate. And sometimes we can sing things that aren’t true without realizing it. Songs that proclaim the Gospel will be songs that are filled with truth – and God’s Word is the standard by which all truth is measured (John 17:17).

“And Can It Be” is a wonderfully rich hymn that describes our salvation and the amazement we feel at being saved by God. But in the second verse, the author (Charles Wesley) writes that Christ “emptied himself of everything except for love.” That’s not really a true statement. Philippians 2 says that Christ simply emptied himself (the Greek word is *kenosis*). There’s nothing to say that he emptied himself of certain things while maintaining others, and a phrase like that could be confusing. Because we didn’t want to stop using such a great song that is so full of truth, our church has changed the phrase to “emptied himself, and came in love.” It’s a minor change that more accurately reflects the truth of the incarnation, and it fits well in the flow of the song.

Sometimes our church has encountered hymns that, while still worth singing, may have entire verses that are unusable. There are several examples of this. One is "Blessed Assurance." The first and third verses are good, but the second has no basis in Scripture: "Visions of rapture appear before me; angels come down from heaven and whisper loving things to me." That picture is very strange, and certainly not based in Scripture. So when we sing "Blessed Assurance" at our church, we sing only the first and third verses.

By far, the most common doctrinal errors come with lyrics that promote an unbiblical view of the Holy Spirit. When we were defining the word "worship," we saw that the New Testament emphasis was *faithful service* and *constant holy living*. We also saw that, since our bodies are the temple of God, the Holy Spirit lives inside of us. When we are saved, we receive the full measure of the Spirit's presence. But one of the false doctrines that the Charismatic Movement teaches is that believers can receive a second filling of the Holy Spirit *after* their salvation. Corporate worship then becomes a time primarily for emotional experiences, and many songs originating in this movement contain language that call the Spirit of God to "come down" or "fall down." But this is simply not true! If we believe that God's Word is perfectly true and submit to its authority, we should never allow songs into our services whose lyrics are in contradiction to Scripture.

This isn't intended to be critical or overly negative. Our goal is not to look suspiciously at every song, expecting to find problems with it. "New" does not mean "bad," and "old" doesn't mean "trustworthy." But song lyrics matter because doctrine matters. Bob Kauflin, whom I quoted earlier, says, "Songs are... theology. We are what we sing." If we care for the spiritual health of our fellow believers, we will carefully evaluate every song text based on Scripture.

Does it show a proper reverence for God?

We saw earlier that worship begins with the person and works of God. Our worship is directed primarily towards God. How then should we think correctly about the Gospel in relation to the songs we sing?

The essence of the Gospel begins with the holiness of God. God's perfect righteousness is a standard that we could never meet on our own. His anger against sin was the reason He turned away from His own Son. So the songs we sing should show a proper reverence for God in all of His perfect attributes. God is not our equal.

For that reason, we should avoid songs that fail to give proper reverence to God. We shouldn't sing about God in a romantic way as if He was our boyfriend. We shouldn't speak to Him casually or flippantly. While it is true that we may come boldly before the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16), our God is still a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). If we want to proclaim the Gospel in our services, we'll sing songs that give proper honor and reverence to God.

Is it clear and understandable?

Aren't you thankful for translators? I am! I'm thankful that I can read God's Word in my own language without having to know ancient Greek and Hebrew. I'm thankful for a God that has revealed Himself through Jesus – the Word and the Light, the One who gives understanding and clarity. There are certainly things about God and His Word that are difficult to understand, but God does not intend for His truth to be cryptic or inaccessible to us. When we give the Gospel to unbelievers, we seek to be clear; and if we want to sing songs that proclaim the Gospel, the truths we sing should also be clear!

This is another discussion for which 1 Corinthians 14 is helpful, especially verses 14-19. Paul is instructing the believers in the matter of the use of tongues. He repeatedly makes the point that, when we speak, it's more important to be clear than merely sincere! Why? Because we worship God with our spirit *and* with our mind (v. 15). Worship of God is not a mindless nirvana – it is a constant renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2).

Clarity in worship is a matter of words. We should avoid songs that use overly complex words or archaic figures of speech. That doesn't mean that we seek to remove essential points of doctrine or try to appeal to the unsaved. But we also don't want our message to be needlessly hindered by the way we deliver it.

Clarity is also a matter of thoughts. As you examine a song to evaluate its usefulness, don't begin by asking how it feels or how it sounds. Begin by asking, "What truths does this song teach me about God? Will this song build up the faith of my fellow believers and cause them to glorify God for who He is and what He is done?"

Seek texts that are clear. Don't sing statements that are obscure or cryptic. If a sentence or a phrase makes no sense to you and you cannot find a Scriptural basis for it, don't sing it! If it is

confusing, the church will not be built up by it (1 Cor. 14:17). Make the Gospel clear and understandable.

Is it the best choice?

We need to feel the urgency of the task before us. Satan is roaming around like a lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). The Gospel is under attack. Believers around us are struggling to remain firm in their faith. Pain is real and our life is short. We may live seventy or eighty years, but our life is just a mist (Psalm 90:10). We really ought to think of our worship services as a dress rehearsal, a preparation. Every time we meet together on the Lord's Day, we are preparing one another for the day that we will be gathered around the throne worshiping with countless believers from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Revelation 7:9).

We should always keep this in mind when choosing songs. It's not enough to sing songs simply because they don't contain any heresy or because we like the way they sound. Always ask, "Is this song the best and clearest expression of this truth? Am I using it just because it's ok, or because it is the best way to proclaim this aspect of the Gospel?"

A helpful guideline to keep in mind when choosing songs is what I call the "Five-year Test." Our church has a total of about 120 songs that we regularly sing. I'm always asking, "If someone attended our church for five years, what songs would I want them to know? And if they came only for the singing, would the songs we use give them a full and accurate picture of the attributes of God and of the Gospel?"

Take time to carefully choose the best material from old and new sources. Plan the songs you sing with the urgency of eternity. We have only a limited amount of time each week for corporate singing. For our church, that has meant that there are many, many songs that we *could* sing but don't. We have tried to make sure that the songs that make it into our regular rotation are the best we could find. Of course not every song will tell the entire story of the Gospel, but each one teaches a truth that makes up the tapestry of the Gospel. And when a new song comes along that is better than one we have, we'll introduce it to our church family. We want every song we sing to be true, clear, and excellent. The brevity of life demands it, and our Lord deserves it.

Services That Proclaim the Gospel

Why is it so important to think rightly about corporate worship? It's because our meeting on Sunday is central to our Christian life. Robert Rayburn explains why this meeting is so important:

When there are a number of worshippers 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. It is common knowledge that a mob is more cruel than any individual in it would be by himself. Similarly, the enjoyment of an elite company of music lovers at the symphony is more intense than that of a single music lover sitting by himself listening to the same music. God has so created man that there are deeper delights and more intense inspiration in the worshipping congregation than in individual devotion.

This is why the writer of Hebrews commands us to “not neglect to meet together” (Heb. 10:25) – because believers were designed to need corporate worship! It was inconceivable in the New Testament church for an individual to claim to know Christ but not meet regularly with other believers. Paul puts it this way: “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (1 Corinthians 14:26).

If our services are so important, how can we structure and deliver them in such a way that they proclaim the Gospel? Does the New Testament give us any direction for what our worship services should look like?

Edmund Clowney has compiled a list of activities that took place in the life of the New Testament church when they gathered together:

- Corporate prayer (Acts 2:42, 1 Tim. 2:1, 1 Cor. 14:16)
- Reading of Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13, 1 Thes. 5:27, 2 Thes. 3:14, Col. 4:15-16, 2 Pet. 3:15-16)
- Teaching of Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13, Luke 4:20, 2 Tim. 3:15-17)
- The teaching of Scripture as related to table fellowship (Acts 2:42, 20:7)
- Singing that praises God and encourages one another (Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:15, 1 Cor. 14:15, 1 Tim. 3:16, Rev. 5:9-13, 11:17, 15:3-4)
- Giving to the poor as an act of worship (2 Cor. 9:11-15, Phil. 4:18, Heb. 13:16)

- Receiving and distributing gifts relating to the office of a deacon and the gathering of believers (Acts 6:1-6, Rom. 12:8, Rom. 16:1-2, 2 Cor. 8:19-21, Acts 20:4, 1 Cor. 16:1-4)
- Public confession of faith (1 Tim. 6:12, 1 Pet. 3:21, Heb. 13:15)
- Responding to praise and prayer by saying “Amen” (1 Cor. 14:16, Rev. 5:14, Rom. 9:5, Eph. 3:21)
- Confession linked with baptism (1 Pet. 3:21)
- Thanksgiving linked with the Lord’s table (1 Cor. 11:24)

A detailed list like this is valuable to help us see what the elements of corporate worship are. We’ve seen that, in the New Testament, the emphasis of corporate worship is edification. Believers meet together to on the first day of the week to sing together, pray together, give of their material resources, share the Lord’s table, and hear God’s Word taught.

But while these descriptions are helpful, there are almost no specifics in the New Testament about how we should plan and deliver the music portion of the service. We are not explicitly command what kinds of songs to sing (except for Eph. 5:19, which is not specific), what order we should sing them in, what instruments we should use (if any), or a host of other questions that we may ask.

There is also the real consideration of cultural and stylistic preferences. Every church is unique in its makeup of members. Every culture in every period of history has had its own distinct characteristics. And what is normative for one generation may not be normative for the next.

So while it’s relatively simple to look at Scripture passages that give us general principles that describe worship, it’s much harder to make decisions about how our services should actually model this. The truths of Scripture are unchanging, but we are daily growing in our understanding and wisdom; we will not have perfect knowledge until we are in heaven. To that end, we must humbly apply the Word of God and seek to obey it. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:5, we are to be fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of a life shaped by Christ. When it comes to planning and delivering the content of our worship services, we cannot rely on what works or what is comfortable. If we honestly search the Scriptures and see that we ought to change something, we must have the humility to change it – even if it is a tradition.

Not only must we submit to the Word of God, but we must constantly *recommit* to understanding it better. And while we need to make decisions for the particular culture and time period we live in, we should not turn our personal preferences into rules that others must

follow. Where the Scriptures are broad, we must be broad, and where the Scriptures are narrow, we must be narrow.

There are so many considerations of styles, cultures, and preferences that will make every church's services look different from one another. As we saw earlier, diversity in worship is a wonderful, God-ordained thing, as long as we are all submitted to the Word of God. But there is a characteristic that should describe every worship service around the world, regardless of culture, status, education, preference, or style:

Our services should proclaim the Gospel.

John Witvliet describes the parallel between our services and God's promises this way:

Just as the people of Israel gathered together to renew their covenant with God (Joshua 24:1-17), so we Christians gather to renew the new covenant God has made with us in Christ. Christian worship is like a covenant-renewal service in which the gathered reaffirm the vows made with God in Christ... In a worship service, we renew the promises we made (and often failed to keep) to God, and we hear again the promises God has made (and kept!) in Christ.

If that is true, and our worship services are a time to rejoice in the covenant God has made with us, we should plan and prepare in such a way as to make this emphasis intentional, not accidental. For our services to proclaim the Gospel, they must be modeled after the Gospel.

This isn't a new concept. It has been the pattern for most historical liturgies, and they in turn copied it from Scripture. In his book *Christ-Centered Worship*, Bryan Chappell points out that this pattern is clearly displayed in Isaiah 6, Deuteronomy 5, 2 Chronicles 5-7, Romans 11-15, and Revelation 4-21. The sequence can be summarized this way:

- adoration
- confession
- assurance
- response

Taken together, the elements tell the story of the Gospel: God is holy, we are sinners, Christ saves us, and we respond in obedience. Let's consider how this pattern can inform our choices of songs.

First, we already have established that worship begins with God revealing himself to man. You cannot call people to worship God without telling them who God is and what He has done. Begin with songs that proclaim the greatness of God, not the emotions of man. Help one another to turn your gaze away from yourself and the busyness of the week and, instead, meditate on the greatness of God.

Next, there should be some opportunity in the service for believers to acknowledge their sin and confess it to the Lord. William Dyrness calls this a “healthy orientation to reality.” We say with Isaiah, “Woe is me! I am undone! For I am a man of unclean lips... and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.”

But the wonderful reality of the Gospel is that God does not leave us in our sin. “If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Follow confession with a time of rejoicing and thanksgiving for the forgiveness offered to us through Christ. This is a time to say to one another, “If you are in Christ, there is no condemnation for you!” (Rom. 8:1). This is beautifully expressed in the second stanza of the hymn “Before the Throne of God Above”:

*When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see Him there, who made an end to all my sin.
Because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free;
For God the Just is satisfied to look on Him and pardon me.*

The final aspect of the Gospel narrative is *response*. The grace of God given to us in the Gospel compels us to respond in faith and obedience. We respond with giving, singing, listening to God’s Word preached, and preparing to go out into the world to proclaim the Gospel to others. This was Isaiah’s response in Isaiah 6: after his sins were taken away, he expressed an eager desire to serve the Lord.

This pattern isn’t prescriptive. There’s no Scriptural mandate that a service has to have one song from each category, and in that order. But consider what criteria we use for planning and presenting the music in a service. Are our choices arbitrary? Pragmatic? Or do we carefully choose and plan songs in order to help people remember and rejoice in the Gospel?

Ministry That Proclaims the Gospel

We've looked at what it means to "worship God," and how the Scriptures describe worship to us. We've also discussed how to plan services that proclaim the Gospel and choose songs that proclaim the Gospel. But even more important than the content are the hearts of the worshippers, and the motives before God for which they minister. John MacArthur has wisely said, "You don't measure the success of a ministry by its size, but rather by the degree to which its members look like Jesus Christ." So it is with music ministry: we measure our success not based on the quality of the music we produce, but by how Christ-like we are, and to the degree that our worship is faithful to the Scriptures. Here are three essential characteristics that should be true of every musician who serves in ministry.

1. Be Clean

True worship is internal and pervasive, not external and ceremonial. During His earthly ministry, Jesus reserved His harshest words for those who pretended to be outwardly self-righteous but were actually living in pride and conceit. He quotes Isaiah 29: "These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They are worshiping me in vain!" Instead, Jesus says, the Father is seeking worshipers with pure hearts to worship Him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4).

Corporate worship on Sunday must be an outflow of private worship throughout the week. It's true that our righteousness is based on the finished work of Christ, and not on our own efforts. But for us to be qualified to lead worship publicly, we must be consistently giving ourselves to prayer, growing in the Word, confessing sin, and pursuing right relationships with others. Psalm 51 is a beautiful picture of the inseparable link between confession and proclamation. When we confess our sin (v. 4), God restores the joy of our salvation to us (v. 12), and then He opens our mouth to declare his praises (v. 15). You can't publicly proclaim until you've privately confessed.

2. Be Excellent

In one of the greatest displays of worship in the New Testament, Mary pours out her costly perfume – worth a year's wages – on the feet of Christ. John tells us the reason for Judas' objection, which was his greed. But it's likely that the other disciples also may have wondered

at this apparent waste. Their unspoken question can be ours as well: “Would it not be better stewardship to give this money/effort/time to a more immediately obvious cause?”

But Jesus validates Mary’s sacrificial act. And as we sacrifice our time and energy and resources each week to bring extravagant worship to the feet of Christ, our labors are validated as well. Excellence in worship is not primarily about adherence to a man-made musical standard, but it is instead a deep and abiding commitment by each team member to offer the Lord his or her best. To this end, we should strive to pursue an excellence that minimizes distractions, draws attention away from us and our presentation, and points the congregation to the manifold riches of Christ and the gospel. Don’t bring the Lord offerings that are blind or lame. Bring the best you have, as an expression of worship and adoration.

3. Be Nobody

The leading of corporate praise is the most visible ministry in the church. It’s easy to become focused on performance and the approval of others. When we use our God-given gifts to bring to glory to ourselves, we’re stealing the glory that rightly belongs to God. “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give glory, for the sake of Your steadfast love and your faithfulness!” (Psalm 115)

Since we seek to draw attention to the Lord and away from ourselves, our constant goal is to have a demeanor of Christ-like humility. We reject the culture of modern, commercialized performance that glorifies the performer and trivializes the character of God. Our prayer should be that of John the Baptist: “He must increase, and I must decrease” (John 3).

Being “nobody” doesn’t mean we demean ourselves, minimizing our gifts in false humility. As C.S. Lewis so adroitly put it, “True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.” So lead and worship and serve in a spirit of humility that causes the gathered church to give all attention to Christ. They should leave every Sunday forgetting our names and remembering His.

As you plan , lead, or participate in corporate worship every week, strive to proclaim the gospel in every aspect of your service. Choose songs that help people think biblically about God’s holiness, man’s sinfulness, the promise of forgiveness in Christ, and the response of believers to obey and serve the Lord. Present all aspects of the service in such a way that God is clearly and powerfully proclaimed and believers are able to respond. And work to cultivate a ministry that is characterized by purity, excellence, and humility. This is how we can help lead our fellow believers to worship “in spirit and truth.”