

PHILOSOPHY of PUBLIC and CORPORATE WORSHIP

~ Adopted by the Elders of Grace BFC Wallingford on April 18, 2017 ~

“God is holy and worthy to be praised. We will gather together as God’s people to focus our worship on Him through His Son, Jesus Christ.” – from Grace Bible Fellowship Church’s Vision Statement (February 11, 2009)

This Philosophy of Public and Corporate Worship strives to describe what this vision means when applied to the Sunday morning gathering of believers for a worship service at Grace Bible Fellowship Church in Wallingford. Scriptural and personal/cultural considerations of public and corporate worship are discussed and guiding principles are stated. With Spirit-led consideration, these principles should be used to evaluate and make recommendations for specific elements of the worship service.

Definition of Worship

Public and corporate worship is the “drawing near of the hearts of the congregants to God” (Isaiah 29:13). We see this as necessarily having both an inward and outward dimension; congregants recognize and are moved by the majesty and goodness of God, and participate corporately in responses brought about by that recognition. This involves praising Him, acknowledging who He is, and learning more about Him in the process. Public and corporate worship during the Sunday morning service will help us build up ourselves and the church (1 Corinthians 14:26), and leads us to a commitment to continue that worship in other ways throughout the week.

Scriptural Considerations

The Bible mentions the word “worship” over two hundred times. There are two dimensions to worship in Scripture: bending the knee/bowing and service. The focus of this document is on the former, even though we recognize that the two meanings are inseparable and that, in a sense, all of life for the believer may be considered an offering to the Lord and thus worship (Romans 12:1). Additionally, it is important that God’s people come before him in private worship and prayer in their personal devotional experience throughout all aspects of their lives.

Biblical references identify key characteristics of worship. Foremost among these is the concept of “praise,” a word that occurs over three hundred times in the Bible. Praise, as evidenced in Scripture, can be a verbal, public proclamation; a silent, private proclamation; or a set of actions that are the means by which these are carried out. These proclamations and actions are focused towards recognizing God for who He is and what He has done; acknowledging and proclaiming

Him in all of his fullness; confessing and repenting of sins; and showing reverence, thankfulness, and commitment to obedience.

Scripture also points to certain key elements of a worship service, as summarized by the denomination's Biblical Principles for Living:

101-1.6 Examples of corporate worship in the New Testament include: the reading of Scripture, prayer, praise, confession, singing, giving, thanksgiving, preaching and teaching, and the ordinances. The expression of these may be shaped by the cultural setting of a particular church and must be done in a fitting and orderly way.

These characteristics and elements of worship appear to have two key common denominators. First, they all involve intentional action and active participation by worshipers. All actions are, and must be, directed towards God in response to who He is. Secondly, these intentional actions need to be underpinned by Godly motives that go to the heart, that are not a mere following of rules and traditions, and that are done in such a way that they are pleasing to God, keeping the focus on Him. God must be the center of the focus of our attention in worship, ensuring that all actions of worship are ones that are pleasing to Him and seeking His will for how He would be worshiped, and not guided by what will please the worshipers for one reason or another.

God-centered and God-pleasing worship must always be Spirit-led and based in Scripture, so as not to fall into what God warns us about: "...These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught." (Isaiah 29:13).

Personal and Cultural Considerations

A God-pleasing and meaningful time of public and corporate worship is promoted and hindered by a variety of things that are personal and cultural in nature. The church and our worship leaders have to maximize what "enables" people and minimize what "distracts" people from worship, and do so in such a way that they do not succumb to the temptations to appeal to what pleases people rather than what pleases God. When it is felt that culture needs to be changed in light of God's will for our worship, these "enablers" and "distracters" will have to be the focal points of attention.

God has created all people as unique emotional and rational beings. They are different in the way that they feel, react and respond emotionally and physically, their likes and dislikes, and the way that they learn. They will, therefore, vary significantly over the elements of a worship service that would enable them to express their worship to God. It is likely that one element may be an enabler for one individual and a distracter for another.

Since people come from a variety of different backgrounds, culture permeates worship. This is especially true of public and corporate worship, where people assemble publicly to praise God and draw near to Him. When the worship service is held, where it is held, the symbols portrayed

in the environment in which it is held, the particular way the worship service is structured, the elements of that worship service, the length, the type of music and instruments, and type of participation all are deeply shaped by cultural factors, preferences, and traditions. Grace Bible Fellowship Church strives to build its own culture for public and corporate worship as it navigates the different preferences coming out of the different backgrounds and cultures of its congregants and those whom it seeks to incorporate.

These personal and cultural differences, therefore, can be both a source of excitement and exploration that energize, and/or sources of mental, emotional, or even physical stress. Many times, they are both. Determining what is best for the congregation as a whole is, therefore, a particularly difficult task, and recommendations for particular elements should be prayerfully sought, finding their basis in Scripture.

Guiding Principles

The Scriptural and philosophical elements explored above lead us to guiding principles for public and corporate worship. These principles are designed to stand the test of time and are to be used as a basis for specific, practical and concrete recommendations for the elements of the Sunday morning worship service.

1. Worship should be carried out in such a way that it not only conforms to Scripture, but draws on practices detailed in Scripture for the honoring of God for our guidance and enrichment.
2. As we design God-pleasing times of worship, it should take into account the individuals and culture of the particular congregation, approaching any recommendations for change in humility, with care and sensitivity.
3. Subject to God's will, we should be constantly searching for ways to enhance enablers and mitigate distracters to worship, knowing that they may vary between individuals. In this, we should pay special attention to the emotional and cognitive aspects of worship.