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Authentic Worship



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Authentic Worship

Tom Ascol

Does God have an opinion about how we should worship Him? Yes, actually, He does. In fact, He has expressed Himself repeatedly on the subject. The first commandment tells us whom to worship: “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3) and the second tells us how to worship: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Exodus 20:4–6).

It matters to God how we worship Him. He even killed Nadab and Abihu for their unjustified antics in worship (Leviticus 10:1–4). As R.C. Sproul once remarked, we can all be grateful that the Lord was simply making a point and not establishing a pattern when He did this. But the fact that the Lord does not strike dead everyone who approaches Him inappropriately in worship should not lead us to conclude that He no longer cares about how He is approached. Nor should we think that worship in the new covenant is less important to the Lord than it was in the old.

Jesus told the woman at the well that “an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23–24). Spirit and truth—with internal devotion and external guidance. Since God’s Word is truth (John 17:17), should not the Bible at least be consulted before we plan what we intend to do in a service we call “worship”? Of course it should. In fact, it should govern our worship.

The progress of God’s revelation from old covenant to new is the progress from type, promise and shadow to antitype, fulfillment and reality. In worship it is a move from detailed prescriptions and ceremonies to simplicity that encourages full focus on Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3). What we find, then, in New Testament instruction is the emphasis that worship is to be from the heart and according to the Word. The essential elements of worship (which we ascertain from the Word—public reading of Scripture, preaching, praying, giving, singing, observing baptism and the Lord’s Supper) must all be regulated by the Word.

This does not mean that every corporate worship service will look the same or have the same “feel” wherever or whenever it occurs. Rather, the contrary is true. This approach to worship safeguards it from cultural captivity. Word-regulated

worship will seek to be authentically expressed within any culture while following God's revealed will for how we are to approach Him. The elements of worship will remain the same while the heartfelt employment of them may vary widely from culture to culture.

A significant part of what is involved in worshipping "in spirit" is being authentic. This requires sincerity and honesty before God in acknowledging who we are and who we are not as we approach Him in worship. It also requires humility that refuses to allow individual preferences to undermine corporate expressions of worship.

Ken Puls, who directs the music ministries at Grace Baptist Church where I serve, has challenged me to think more clearly about this issue over the last few years. Specifically, his insights into a church "finding its voice" have helped me express what I mean by "authentic worship." He shares those insights in the pages that follow.

Individual worshipers form a corporate body that approaches God together in our times of gathered worship. Who are those individuals? First and foremost, they are disciples of Jesus (others may be with us, but worship is the activity of believers). This reality trumps but does not obliterate all other distinctions. Race, ethnicity, age, education, understanding, experience, marital status, language, etc.—all these and more make individual worshipers unique, but none of them is more important than knowing Christ (which means that I have more in common with a believing Zambian than an unbelieving sibling). Each covenanted member of a church adds to the tone of the body's "voice."

Here is how I see that working itself out in practical ways. A village church in Zambia will sing songs not only in the official language of English but also in the tribal languages of that village. The cadence, harmonies, bodily movements (such as swaying) and instrumentation may be completely different from those that mark the singing of equally orthodox churches in Houston or Beijing. There may also be differences in the way the Scripture is read and preached in those congregations. Scripture can regulate worship in all three settings without the expectation that worship in the three churches will look or feel exactly the same.

In fact, if all three of the churches do look exactly the same in their gathered worship times then at least two of them (and maybe all three) are not being authentic. Why? Because Zambians, Chinese and Houstonians have natural differences that will inevitably cause their respectively indigenous churches to have different "voices" even while seeking to worship the same God in the same spirit and in the same truth.

In this issue of the *Founders Journal* we are privileged to have insights from leaders who are committed to leading their respective churches in authentic, God-honoring worship. What they have written can encourage our ongoing efforts to see our worship being reformed according the Word of God. ☞

Music and the Church

Finding Our Voice in Worship

Ken Puls

One of the clearest commands we have in Scripture regarding worship, is the command to come before the Lord with music and singing. The Old Testament is filled with such commands. When Israel celebrated their deliverance from the armies of Pharaoh at the Red Sea and sang the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam, they were exhorted:

Sing to the LORD, For He has triumphed gloriously!
The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea! (Genesis 15:21)

Many verses in the psalms call forth our joy and praise through music. We read in Psalm 33:2–3 for example:

Praise the LORD with the harp;
Make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings.
Sing to Him a new song;
Play skillfully with a shout of joy.

We turn to the New Testament and Paul instructs us in Ephesians 5:

And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God (Ephesians 5:18–21).

And again in Colossians 3:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (Colossians 3:16–17).

And it is not just here on earth that we are exhorted to praise God through music. In the book of Revelation we are given glimpses into worship in heaven. Revelation 15:2–4 records one of the songs we will sing:

And I saw something like a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who have the victory over the beast, over his image and over his mark and over the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God. They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying:

“Great and marvelous are Your works,
Lord God Almighty!
Just and true are Your ways,
O King of the saints!
Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name?
For You alone are holy.
For all nations shall come and worship before You,
For Your judgments have been manifested.”

From this and similar passages we see that, in the courts of heaven, we will continue to lift praises to God with our voices and with musical instruments.

The command is clear—sounded throughout the Word of God. We are to sing before the Lord and play our instruments in praise to His name. But though the command is clear, *what* we should sing and *what* we should play is less clear. We are confronted with many choices, many styles and ideas about music in our day. What are we to bring and offer to God in worship through song? How do we choose music for worship that is God-centered and God-honoring? These are questions we face, week after week, as we plan and prepare for the corporate worship of God’s people. What makes a song conducive to worship? What makes one song a better choice than another when we plan our services and craft our orders of worship? Too many in our day choose songs simply out of expedience or personal preference. We can play this song well—we like this song. But we must go much further in evaluating music if our music is truly to honor God and reflect His glory and not simply reflect our own likes and limitations.

What are the filters we should have in place as we screen and select music for the purpose of congregational worship? I want to give you three filters that I have found useful in selecting music for worship:

- 1) Is it truthful?
- 2) Is it suitable?
- 3) Is it authentic?

We want music that is doctrinally sound, structurally sound (in both poetry and music) and congregationally sound.

Music Must Be Doctrinally Sound

We must begin with the text. Are the words of the song focused on God and on His Word? Are they substantial, saturated with truth, in submission to truth and informed by truth? If the song lacks truth or fails to conform to truth, we need go no further.

We must grill the text with questions. We should question the origin of the text: Who wrote the words? Why were the words written? We should question the message of the text: What do the words communicate? Is what the words communicate conducive to worship? We should question the purpose of the text: Do the words have a worthwhile and noble purpose? Does the purpose of the text serve us in our worship? For example:

- Does it invite us into the presence of God?
- Does it focus our attention on God—His attributes, and works?
- Does it call upon God to meet with us in worship?
- Does it declare and proclaim His Word to us?
- Does it help us confess our sin?
- Does it help us to rejoice in Christ and the forgiveness of sin?
- Does it teach us by expounding the truth of God's Word?
- Does it commission us to go out and live in obedience?
- Does it voice our prayers and petitions to God?
- Does it remind us of the promises of His Word?
- Does it express our praise and adoration to God?
- Does it express our thanksgiving to God?
- Does it voice our submission to God in obedience to His Word?

We should question the biblical moorings of the text: What Scripture passages are quoted or alluded to in the text? Do the words clearly and accurately teach and proclaim the Word of God?

We should question the theology of the text: What do the words teach us about the Person and work of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, about humanity, about sin, about the gospel of Christ, about the church? Does the music consistently set before the congregation the great doctrines of Scripture?

There are truths that we need reminded of frequently. We need to remember that our God is sovereign and in control of all things. We need to dwell often on justification by faith alone in Christ alone. We need to meditate on the imputed righteousness of Christ. Music can be a great blessing as it serves us in embedding these essential doctrines into our thinking. What we sing feeds our soul. We must be careful that our songs are spiritually healthy, theologically balanced, and doctrinally rich.

We should question the placement of the text within the service: Does the music before the sermon help us focus on God and enter into worship? Does the music we sing after the sermon hold us accountable to the truths we proclaimed

in the message? Does the music as a whole support and undergird the preaching and teaching ministry of the church?

This is the first test—are the words to the music doctrinally sound? We want to sing words with substance and depth that reflect the truths of Scripture. We want music that is composed and designed to impart truth, not just create an experience that makes us feel good. We want to sing words that appropriately respond to and hold us accountable to Scripture. And we want to sing the words of Scripture itself (psalms and other passages). Test the music first by its veracity. Is it true to the Word of God? If it passes this test, then next consider the structure.

Music Must Be Structurally Sound

Is the music well written and composed? Is the poetry clear, concise and well-crafted? Are the words and the tune singable? Are they free from worldly associations that would distract from worship and profane what God considers sacred? Do the tune and text together communicate a congruent message? There are many good tunes and good texts that are simply mismatched. One that I can remember while growing up was “Love Lifted Me.” It begins:

I was sinking deep in sin far from the peaceful shore,
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more...

The words are set to a joyful tune—a good tune, but very mismatched, at least at the beginning of the verse, with words that are trying to communicate desperation and our hopeless state when we are outside of Christ. We want to wed music and words that strengthen the message, not confuse it.

One example of what I would consider a well-matched text and tune is 175 in the Baptist Hymnal (1991):

“Man of Sorrows,” What a Name, for the Son of God who came.
Ruined sinners to reclaim, Hallelujah, What a Savior!

Both the text and the tune communicate a wonder and profoundness of what God has accomplished for us in the gospel.

Again, we must ask questions: Why was the music composed? What does the music communicate? Is what the music communicates conducive to worship? Can the music be used effectively to accompany acts and words of worship? Are the associations of the music with other texts, other messages, or other purposes too strong to allow the tune to transfer into sacred use? For example, if I were writing the words to a call to worship, inviting people to come and worship God, I would not want to set the words to the tune of “Here Comes Santa Claus!” That is not to say that the tune is bad, evil or even secular. It does however, at least here in America, have secular associations that make it entirely unfit for use in worship. The church must take great care in taking music from the world for its own use,

especially when uniting music to Scripture. The associations of the songs with secular or even wicked contexts may be too strong to allow the music to be useful in the church.

Although we have freedom to create and enjoy music in a wide array of activities and venues, not all music is conducive to worship. A church service, a football game and a parade all include music that we can enjoy to the glory of God. But a worship service is not a football game or a parade. Each activity requires music suitable to its purpose. Music that we enjoy hearing at venues outside of the church may not be appropriate or fitting for the purpose of worship. In worship we are pursuing a well-defined purpose and seeking to communicate a clear message. As we choose music for worship, we must be wise in finding tunes that will serve as a suitable accompaniment to those thoughts, actions and elements that Scripture affirms as appropriate for worship. In worship we are communing with the Sovereign God and proclaiming His Word. Our music should reflect the significance and importance of our endeavor.

In the end we must judge the worth or merits of the song to serve as an offering of worship. As we measure the worth of a song we weigh its value according to three standards: insight, perfection and inexhaustibility.

Insight

Does it add something of value to the service?

Does it communicate clearly? Or does it confuse?

Does it help us effectively express what we want to say to God, what we want to be before God, what we want to do in obedience to His Word?

Perfection

Not is it perfect in the sense of “without error,” but is it complete?

Does it say all it needs to say?

Or is something left out? Is something out of place?

Does it represent the best of what we can bring to God in worship through our musical style? Is it a sacrifice of praise in which we have invested ourselves? Or is it just something to sing? Is it just something to fill an empty space in our order of worship?

Inexhaustibility

Is it memorable? Is it worth remembering?

Is it worth singing again?

Has it stood the test of time?

Can you sing often in your services without it wearing out over time?

Does it become richer and more meaningful each time it is sung? Or does it prove to be shallow and spent after a few hearings? Can it be appreciated across generations or even across cultures or languages?

These are some of the filters we can use as we think through our music. Once you have found music that is doctrinally sound and structurally sound, there is still one more test to consider:

Music must be Congregationally Sound

We must sing music that is sound in doctrine and well-composed, but our music must also be an authentic expression of the church body. It must help us voice our Christian experience—not just our joy and our praise, but our longings, our struggles with sin and temptation, our failures and sorrows, our victories and successes, our shame and repentance, our faith and adoration, our awe of God and our own sense of inadequacy, our commitment and devotion—and much more!

When we select music for worship, we are choosing music that will be voiced by the whole congregation. There may be music we sing individually, with our families at home, or at other venues that would not work well in corporate worship in the church. And so we must ask of what we sing: Will this be understood by the congregation? Can they comprehend this? Can they sing this? Can they say this? Can they express this well? Does the level of difficulty, instrumentation and musical style fit the congregation? Can the song be embraced by the people? Not just can they learn the notes and sing the right words, but can they sing it from their hearts? The music we sing should be an authentic voice of our people!

So how do we determine our voice? Maybe we should first ask:

What shapes the voice of a church?

There are many influences that help shape the musical voice of a church. Six of the most significant are its gifts, its understanding of its purpose, its theology, its heritage, its joys and trials, and its expectations.

1. The voice of the church is shaped largely by its gifts—its leaders, its musicians, its people. Everyone whom God brings together in a local church contributes to the voice of that church. We have One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of us all—we share a common faith and should hold to the same truth, the same Word. But churches are also each unique, each with unique experiences and gifts.

Though we must speak as one, no two voices will sound exactly alike. A song that works well in one church may fall flat in another. A small church that has only one member who can play the piano will have a different voice than a large church where God in His providence has assembled several accomplished musicians. A church where the music is primarily led by a pipe organ will have a different sound than a church led by piano, keyboard, guitar, bass, flute and trumpet. The musical gifts in the congregation, the leadership gifts of those who plan and teach and oversee the ministry of the church—all help determine a church's voice.

2. The voice of the church is also shaped by its understanding of its purpose.

As the leadership and the congregation work through priorities and ask the important question: What are we doing here? Their answer will in part shape their voice.

The congregation must have a clear understanding of its purpose. Why do the people of God gather together each Lord's Day and why God has united them together as one body? What do we see as our primary purpose as the body of Christ gathered together as a covenanted body of believers?

- Teaching people the Word of God
- Evangelizing the lost and reaching them with the gospel
- Bringing people into close intimate communion with God
- Motivating people to love and obedience to God
- Helping people grow through meaningful relationships
- Glorifying God as the majestic Almighty One in worship
- Bearing witness that the Christian faith is relevant to our age

All of these are good purposes and there are many more I could list. The order, emphasis and balance (or lack thereof) that each church brings to these good and necessary purposes will largely determine its form of worship, the choice of its songs and the shape of its voice.

3. The voice of the church is shaped by its theology. Our understanding of God, the gospel and the Christian life will have an impact on our musical voice. What we know and believe concerning the truths of Scripture will be largely displayed in our singing. We want our music to reflect a God-centered theology, not man-centered. As we evaluate and ask questions of the text (as we discussed above), our grasp of truth will inform our efforts. As we seek words that reflect the truths of the whole of Scripture—as we try to select songs that reflect the full scope of our response to God in worship, our understanding of theology will largely influence our choices and shape our voice.

4. The voice of the church is shaped by its heritage. Our time and place in history will have a part in God's providence in determining our voice. What musical instruments are available to us? In what language will we sing? What songs from past generations have we inherited and learned? What songs are being written in our own day?

As a church we should desire to sanctify the best of our musical traditions available to us in the time and place in which we live. We should also remember the best contributions to church music of past generations. We should continue to embrace great hymns of the faith such as the "Holy, Holy, Holy" and the Doxology. We must remember that we are only a part of God's great redemptive work through the ages. The Kingdom of God is much larger than our own fellowship, our own associations and our own comfort zones.

5. The voice of the church is shaped by its joys and trials. As God is providentially at work in the life of the church, He will shape its voice. Sometimes He will do extraordinary things in His providence that will embed a song into the voice of the church.

In the summer of 2004 our young people from Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida went to the Saved By Faith Youth Challenge in Panama City Beach. There they learned the song “Made Me Glad” by Miriam Webster. A portion of the words to that song declare to God:

You are my Shield, my Strength, my Portion, Deliverer,
My Shelter, Strong Tower, My very present help in time of need.

A few weeks after we introduced the song to our congregation, Hurricane Charley hit Southwest Florida. Because the song was fresh in our memory, many sang that song while riding out the storm. When we met for the first time after the hurricane, we sang that song together—in a dark, hot building, no light, no air-conditioning, but sweet and precious fellowship as we rejoiced together at God’s mercy and kindness in keeping us safe. Now when we sing those words together in worship, they are not only theological truths, but we can remember place and time and event where God showed Himself strong for us as a church. He was our “Shield, our Strength, our Portion, Deliverer, our Shelter, Strong Tower, our very present help in time of need.” And He continues to be so. As we respond in biblical ways to our struggles and successes—as we keep the gospel before us and grow in repentance and faith—as we keep our hope and confidence in Christ—this will have an impact on our musical voice. The providence of God can be powerful in shaping the voice of His people.

6. The voice of the church is shaped by its expectations. If we do not expect God to continue to shape and mold us—if we are not growing and maturing together in love and unity, our voice will grow stagnant and dim. We must help the church in our day find its musical voice in worship and add its voice to the praise of God through the ages.

How can we help a church find its voice?

1. To be authentic we must be thoughtful and deliberate. It takes time and energy to find and prepare music—to plan for worship. Arranging a meeting between God and His people can never be something we take lightly or engage in half-heartedly.

In the Psalms we have precedence for being thoughtful in our planning of music and worship, intentional in our choices of tunes and instruments to accompany our singing. We see inscriptions giving directions for specific instruments, specific tunes and specific occasions. This is an example we should follow as we find and compile the music that will carry our church’s voice. If we are to see

improvement and growth, we must be thoughtful and deliberate in our planning and preparation.

2. To be authentic we must be committed to truth. We must be more concerned that God is rightly proclaimed and His Word is clearly set forth, than we are about hearing our favorite songs in worship. We must be more concerned that our music rightly reflects the truth of who God is, than sounding like the world we are trying to evangelize.

We should not look to the world to set our standards and shape our voice. This is a great dilemma in our day. In a failed quest to be relevant in the eyes of the world, the church is largely looking to the world to set and establish musical style. Unlike many eras of the past in music history—where the church determined the direction and bent of musical composition and the world was mimicking the church—today the roles are largely reversed. Marketing and sales seem to have more influence over the anthems and songbooks being churned out than the glory of God and a desire to make Him known.

Compare this to what God teaches us about worship in the Psalms. The Psalms are a book of worship. Its very contents are the songs of worship. But even its structure teaches us about worship. As you read through the book of Psalms, especially if you read the psalms in order from 1 to 150, you will notice that praise increasingly, more and more, dominates the prayers and songs of God's people. Early on there are many petitions and laments, but as you near the end of the Psalter, these petitions and laments grow fewer and fewer until from about Psalm 145 to the end there is only pure praise. Our end in worship is the glory of God. In the end, it is all about Him. But look how God chose to begin the book. What would you expect at the beginning of a book of worship? An exhortation to praise? An opening prayer? No, God instead begins with a blessing and warning:

Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:1–2).

The opening words of the Psalms are a warning to God's people not to imitate the world, not to go after the world. Rather, we are to be a people who delight in the Word of God. In a day when the church is looking to the world to set the pace and birth the styles, this is a warning we must heed in church music. As God's people we must be committed to truth—committed to accurately reflecting the splendor and holiness of God, willing to set aside anything that diminishes that glory.

3. To be authentic we must embrace the new as well as the old. We must keep a healthy balance of old and new in our music. We must continue to sing and

cherish the old, established, proven hymns. God has been at work in every age. His Kingdom is greater than just what is happening right now. We are but a vapor and He is infinitely great. We acknowledge His greatness and our own smallness when we look beyond the present and include the great hymns of the faith from ages past in our worship today.

But we also must not disregard the new songs of our day. The voice of the church is not stagnant. As God is at work adding to His church, sanctifying new gifts, growing us in the knowledge of truth, there is always a new song and fresh praise. I find it helpful in sorting through music to think in terms of four categories:

1) *The first is what I call “Discarded Music”*

This is music of the past—some of it of poor quality and questionable usefulness, even in its day—but also music that may have had a brief usefulness, but for whatever reason, it did not endure or become a lasting contribution of its age or generation. We know the past largely by what has endured, but every age has had its share of discarded music. History has proven most music does not last beyond its own generation. We should generally avoid what has faded away. However, once in a while, rummaging through the forgotten music of the past, you just might find a discarded jewel.

2) *The second is “Treasured Music”*

This is also music of the past, but this music has endured and become a lasting contribution of its age or generation. It has value and quality and depth beyond its age. Here is where you find the great hymns of the faith—music we should continue to value and sing, remembering that we are part of God’s Kingdom through the ages. I would include in this category hymns such as the Doxology, “A Mighty Fortress,” and “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

3) *Three: “Temporary Music”*

This is music of our day that seems below standard and destined to pass away. Some of it may have a brief usefulness, but much of it lacks those qualities of worth we considered a few moments ago. In general we should avoid this music as well.

4) *And fourth: “Potential Treasured Music”*

This is music of our day that seems destined for endurance. Search for it and embrace it. While contemporary music is the hardest for us to judge and discern, and no one can tell exactly which songs God will choose to preserve in His providence for ages to come, we should be musical treasure hunters. A few of my choices for this category include “In Christ Alone,” “How Deep the Father’s Love” and “I Will Glory in My Redeemer.”

We must guard against two false views of church music:

- 1) The music of past generations is superior to the music of today, so we should be content to sing only the old proven songs.
- 2) Music of past generations is no longer relevant to today, so we should be content to only the new songs of our day and time.

Neither view is true, helpful or acceptable. We appreciate and benefit from great preachers and great messages from the past—but at the same time we continue to preach and write new sermons, instructing the people of our day in the truth of God’s Word. We are enriched by the insightful, deep prayers of saints of past, such as the Puritans—but at the same time, we keep praying, voicing to God the concerns of our day, the cries of our hearts in our words. We must strive for this balance in our music as well, enjoying the fruits of our heritage in church music, and adding our own new song to God’s praise through the ages.

4. To be authentic we must nurture and pray for our gifts. Every church has its own voice, its own gifts, its own strengths and weaknesses. We must avoid trying to make the church fit a determined mold or be just like the church down the street. We must help the church develop its own gifts to God’s glory.

We should pray for gifts:

- Pastors and elders who understand the value of music and are committed to helping the church find its musical voice in worship
- Worship leaders who understand both music and theology
- Service musicians—instrumentalists and vocalists—who are committed to serving together in a humble and gracious spirit (not lone-rangers who ride in to save the day, or prima-donnas who must be pampered and coaxed and delicately tip-toed around)
- People who are committed to honoring God with their music and who are willing to esteem others better than themselves. People who are committed to unity in Christ though coming together from different generations, cultures, experiences, education backgrounds and abilities—all speaking to one another—ministering to one another—in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in the heart to the Lord

Pray that God would add such gifts to our churches and that He would grow and sanctify and mature those who are already serving.

5. To be authentic we must be have patience and humility.

We need patience—great music does not happen over night. It takes time to develop and nurture musical gifts. It takes time and many hours of rehearsal for individual musicians to become a well-blended ensemble. It takes time for choirs and congregations to learn and embrace good music. We must be committed to

reformation over the long term and pray that God would continue to grow us spiritually and musically.

And we need humility—worship is about God—it is not about us. We need to cast off and put down this idea that church music should conform to what I want to hear. Whether it be: “I only want to sing my music—not all that old stuff.” Or “I only want to sing what I already know—don’t teach me anything new.” The voice of the church is not the voices of individuals all doing their own thing. It is the voice of patience, humility and charity as we come together in unity in a common purpose to glorify God. When Paul exhorts us to sing “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” he does not say “singing what you want most to hear” or “singing what you find most comfortable.” He says “speaking to one another.” In verse 21 he says: “submitting to one another in the fear of God.” This is esteeming others better than ourselves. This is saying that the glory of God and the voice of His church are more important than me.

At Grace Baptist Church we often sing many older songs—some that would not be first on my own list of favorites. But when I speak to the older members of our congregation, what I find is that they cherish these songs. It is their voice. It is the contribution of their generation to the praise of God through the ages. When they sing these songs they can remember place and time and event where God made Himself known by His Word and His providence. It is their genuine expression of praise. And they are in our church—it vital part of who we are—among the precious gifts that God has given to us. They make up a part of our voice. So all of us, young and old, learn and sing these songs from the heart in our worship.

Singing songs that may not be our preference—new songs or old songs—songs that stretch us and challenge us—singing these songs gives us opportunity to consider others before ourselves. It reminds us that worship is not about us—worship is much greater—worship is about God. It teaches us charity and unites us. It grows us spiritually and musically as a congregation.

Paul also says “making melody in your hearts to the Lord.” We sing from the heart (not just the lips) and we sing to the Lord (to His glory and His praise, not our own). We must ask: What will best “speak to one another” and communicate clearly the truths of God’s Word? What will most honor Him? What will best declare His glory and carry His Word and rightly make Him known? Paul says of Christ in verse 9 of Philippians 2: “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven and of those on earth and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” This is the goal of God-centered church music—to see every knee humbly bowed down at the name of Jesus and to hear every tongue confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father. May God be pleased to make it so among us. ☪

Sample Worship Service

From Grace Baptist Church, Cape Coral, FL

Morning Worship Service

10:15 a.m.

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

God has poured out His grace

Silent Meditation

*Hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” #15

Scripture Reading

And brought us near by the blood of Christ

Prayer

*Song “Grace Unmeasured” (screen)

**Who suffered and died and rose again
That we might have life eternal**

Offertory Prayer

Anthem “His Life for Mine” Grace Choir

Message Tom Ascol

The True Grace of God

Introduction to 1 Peter

*Hymn of Response to God’s Word [chosen during the message]

*Benediction

* Congregation Stand

† Sing with “Amen”

Worship at Riverbend Community Church

Rick Cobb

Although the purpose of this article is practical by design, it is driven by a strong theological foundation. Riverbend Community Church is a theologically driven church. By God's grace, we desire that our theology impacts everything we do, including the planning and preparation for corporate worship. It is important that you have at least a summary understanding of the theological foundation of Riverbend before understanding why we do what we do.

We are a reformed Southern Baptist church that unashamedly embraces the five points of Calvinism. Our Senior Pastor, Dr. Roy Hargrave, is passionate about proclaiming the whole council of God. We desire that our members have a solid foundation for what they believe and why they believe it. We have our own "Affirmation of Faith" that closely parallels the *1689 London Confession* and we are vigilant in practicing church discipline and seeking to make the glory of God the ultimate end of all that we do. We diligently strive in our motives and methods to be biblical in our proclamation and practice.

Riverbend Community Church (formerly First Baptist Church) recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. Our congregation has embraced reformed theology since Dr. Hargrave's arrival in 1989. Riverbend presently has approximately 1250 members and averages almost 1200 in attendance on Sunday mornings. We have two morning worship services at 9:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. and three Bible Fellowship Group (Sunday School) meeting times: 8 a.m., 9:30 a.m., and 11 a.m. We also have a Sunday evening worship service at 6 p.m. that averages 550 in attendance. Riverbend relocated from its downtown campus eight years ago to its current 112-acre campus. We are presently in the process of building a new 2000 seat worship center in Phase II of our overall physical plant development.

The foundation of theological truth and doctrinal purity drives the manner in which we approach corporate worship. The preaching of the Word of God is the centerpiece of our worship service, which is reflected in the priority it receives, including the amount of time committed to preaching. By necessity, our Sunday worship services must be limited to one hour and twenty-five minutes. Usually, 50-55 minutes are committed to biblical proclamation. In planning and implementing a worship service, we try to maintain a God-ward focus throughout, while deemphasizing logistics, announcements, and anything that draws attention away from God's Word and corporate worship.

Before addressing specifics, I must stipulate that our particular methods of preparation, though they may possess certain unique features, are always driven by prayer and a strong desire to align them with biblical principles. We are certainly not suggesting that every detail of our planning is the way things should be done in any other church. As a matter of fact, we have often adopted variations to

our own planning approach from a methodological standpoint while maintaining foundational verities based on God's Holy Word.

We set aside one hour each week for the purpose of worship planning. There are nine staff members who attend this meeting: Senior Pastor, Executive Pastor, Administrative Pastor, Pastor of Music & Worship, Congregational Worship Leader, Praise Band Musical Director, Technical Director, Staff Arranger and Audio Engineer. We begin our time together in prayer and we are careful in constantly reminding one another of God's intentionality in the biblical goals and motives of His church in worship. We seek to examine ourselves and hold one another accountable to individual faithfulness in private worship, family worship, biblical studies and personal prayer. We also warn one another of the deceitfulness of sin as well as its devastating consequences. We are convinced that those who have heard, understood and loved the biblical truth of God's sovereignty in all things should be the most passionate and sincere worshipers. Theology that is merely academic in nature will be void of passionate and vibrant expressions of corporate worship. In other words, the embrace of theological truth works its way out through practical expressions which are enthusiastic yet contemplative in the context of corporate worship.

The Pastor of Music & Worship drives the planning meeting, but the primary direction comes from the Senior Pastor. We plan all Sunday worship services six weeks in advance. This advance time is necessary due to the fact that we often need extra time to write vocal and instrumental charts, rework arrangements and orchestrations while allowing adequate preparation time for our musicians.

Our services are not usually strictly thematic in nature. Every song does not necessarily directly relate to the text being preached in that particular service but there are a few exceptions. We are also careful to include at least one or two hymns in every worship set. We utilize the choir every Sunday morning and we usually involve our orchestra every other week. We also implement the use of a soloist or an ensemble in every worship service. One of the challenges in using choirs, ensembles and soloists is guarding against a "performance mentality." When using any God-given gift, we must constantly evaluate our motives to be certain it is truly done to the glory of God. The most difficult part of using solos and ensembles is finding music that is theologically sound. I've found that much of the new music of the Christian world is unacceptable due to unbiblical lyrics or inappropriate music. This is one of the primary reasons we encourage theological song writing among our young people. We believe every Christian generation should express itself through writing strong biblical praise and worship to God. Our plans are to publish our reformed contemporary music in the near future.

The next thing we do is evaluate the previous Sunday's services. If there is something we can do better, we want to do it. If we didn't utilize our time well, we want to correct it. If there was a song that wasn't singable to the congregation we want to rectify that matter for future planning. There are several things that can cause a song not to function properly in a worship setting. First, it may not engage the congregation in an enthusiastic, heart-felt expression of praise to God.

Although this is a subjective measure, it is obvious when a song simply doesn't fit the proper exaltation of the great God we worship or the exaltation of humble yet joyful worshipers before the Sacred Head. Here is a partial list of some of the more objective common musical causes of a song that does not function in a worshipful context:

- Musical range too high or low
- Unfamiliar to the congregation
- Accompaniment that doesn't encourage participation
- Melody difficult to sing
- Poor set-up and/or transition
- Poor marriage of text and music

There are times when a song can be rescued through the use of musical or lyrical rearrangement, but usually we simply delete the song from our current repertoire list.

We thoroughly examine a song before adding it to our congregational song list. We always begin with the lyrics. A song that has doctrinal error (these abound today) or a song that simply doesn't pass the gravity of the subject test is not allowed on the list. In other words the song must be acquainted with the majesty of the greatness of the God it is suppose to exalt or it is deleted. I must add however, that a song does not have to be so deep that it has to be studied to be understood. I use the Psalms (intended to be sung) as validation for this. Here is an example of a song we commonly use in corporate worship:

"Holy Is the Lord"
by Chris Tomlin

We stand and lift up our hands
For the joy of the Lord is our strength
We bow down and worship Him now
How great, how awesome is He
And together we sing, everyone sing:

Holy is the Lord God Almighty,
The earth is filled with His glory
Holy is the Lord God Almighty,
The earth is filled with His glory.

And it's rising up all around....
It's the anthem of the Lord's renown.

© 2000 Rivermusic Songs/SixStepsPublishing

There are several things I like about this song. It gives a great sense of congregation (common theme in the Psalms). It doesn't try to fit every major doctrine

into one song. It expresses just a few of the attributes of God, with the major one being His holiness. In addition, it sings well. The text fits the music, naturally allowing the congregation to participate without great effort. This song is deep in that it speaks of the greatness and holiness of God, but it is also simple enough for a child to understand. Riverbend is a church that loves to sing the majestic songs which express theological depth while engaging the mind of the worshiper.

We are always looking for new songs to add to our congregational repertoire. We try to guard against this list getting too long by keeping it to about 100 songs and hymns that our congregation knows very well and can sing with great confidence. This means, in theory, that when we add a new song or hymn, we may relegate another one to the backburner temporarily.

We spend a lot of time working out transitions between elements in the service, including musical transitions. We try to build a flow into the service so it doesn't feel jerky by stopping and starting a lot. We give great care and attention to these logistics so the worshiper does not have to think of these things. We do not strictly script these transitions to allow for some spontaneity.

All of our planning is done on Tuesday each week. There is much time spent individually and in coordination with one another following the Tuesday planning meeting in preparation for Wednesday night, our time of group preparation, anticipation and rehearsal. This is when the singers, instrumentalists and support people are brought into the plan.

Wednesday night rehearsals are tightly scheduled, due to the fact that they involve numerous musicians and vocalists. We desire that every element has been rehearsed and prepared to the degree that it is the best the particular group is capable of achieving musically. We place an emphasis on excellence and musicianship. We've been asked many times if we prefer a soloist who is a great singer or one that is obviously godly in his/her Christian walk. We always answer that question with a question: "Do I have to choose one or the other?" We want both! In fact, we require both. There are many godly people who are not equipped for specific tasks in the music ministry and there are also accomplished vocalists that may not be qualified spiritually for a solo ministry. A soloist should draw attention to Christ—not himself or herself.

Riverbend is unique in that it utilizes a praise band with guitars, drums, electronic keyboards and other modern instruments. Although we are not style-driven, we utilize contemporary musical expressions. There is not space or desire to address the "worship wars" issue in this article, but the fact is, that Riverbend may use musical styles in public worship that are not usually associated with many reformed churches of our day.

We readily recognize some of the dangers and abuses related to the modern worship movement and take heed to these dangers. Among these dangers are man-centered lyrics, experiential focus, a lack of theologically God-centered lyrics, and secular neutrality. While we are mindful of these dangers, we believe a contemporary idiom can be valid and become a natural expression for believers of our generation. Every song was "contemporary" in its day.

The Riverbend Praise Band begins rehearsal at 7:30 p.m. The band consists of: lead piano/keyboard, aux keys, electric guitar, acoustic guitar, bass guitar, percussion, and drums. Orchestral players have sectionals beginning at 7:30 p.m. (brass, woodwind, strings) Celebration Singers (110-voice adult choir) also begins rehearsal at 7:30 p.m. Then at 8 p.m., we all gather on stage to run through Sunday's choir anthem with audio and lighting. At 8:15 p.m., the choir returns to the choir room and rehearses until 9 p.m. We sing mostly from memory.

At 8:15 p.m., the band and orchestra rehearse the worship songs for the following Sunday. At 9 o'clock, the praise team vocalists join the band on stage to rehearse the worship sets for the following Sunday. We dismiss the singers at 10 p.m. and then rehearse solos and/or ensembles with the band and tech. Every one is finished by 10:30 p.m.

Obviously, there is a lot of musical rehearsing that takes place on Wednesday nights. However, that is probably not the most important thing that takes place. We purposely spend time in the Word and prayer. There is always teaching related to the lyrics we will be singing on Sunday. There should be a great anticipation for Sunday, as well as great spiritual preparation. This is constantly a major theme on Wednesday nights.

There are many potential distractions to corporate worship: crying babies, temperature that is too hot or too cold, misspelled words on the screen, dead microphone batteries, loud music, bad timing on lyric projection.....and the list goes on and on. If there is an offence, we want it to be the gospel and not our lack of prayer and proper preparation. We diligently seek to eliminate all distractions if possible. For instance, we provide excellent child-care and teaching opportunities for children as well as encourage parents to use our nursery or to listen with the babies in a better place where sound is provided.

We purposely include the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper as important components of corporate worship. At Riverbend Community Church, we partake of the Lord's Supper once per month on a Sunday night. If anyone needs to be brought before the church to be disciplined, it is done on an evening when we partake of the Lord's Supper. Although our members should understand the symbolic nature of the ordinances, we always take time to explain them biblically for the sake of guests in attendance, as well as continually teaching their significance to our Riverbend members. We want to avoid any confusion related to misunderstandings and false teachings such as "transubstantiation" and "baptismal regeneration."

We always include the public reading of Scripture and prayer in every service. We do not extend a public altar call for various reasons, but we do provide pastors at each exit to answer any questions about the preached Word or offer encouragement to those seeking the Lord in salvation. We include the giving of tithes and offerings as part of the corporate service, believing it to be an act of worship.

This is a brief overview of the philosophy and implementation of the planning and preparation of corporate worship. Although there are many ways to approach the planning of corporate worship, one thing is certain: God is worthy of

worship! Although we should worship God daily as individuals (this is vital), there is something significant that happens when the church comes together to worship our magnificent God as a congregation.

“Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” (Psalm 29:1–2 ESV). ☩

Sample Worship Service

From Riverbend Community Church, Ormond Beach, FL

Welcome & Announcements		Pastor Jason Karr
Reading of Scripture	Revelation 4: 1-11 ESV	Pastor Jason Karr
Prayer		Pastor Jason Karr
Choir	“Lord, You’re Holy”	Celebration Singers
	With Riverbend Orchestra; Soloist, Donna Karr	
Worship Set:		Heyward Evans/Praise Team
	“Holy and Awesome” (Righteous Are You, Lord)	
	“Holy Is the Lord” (God Almighty)	
	“Holy, Holy, Holy”	
Prayer		Heyward Evans
Solo	“The Majesty and Glory of Your Name”	Alison Glenfield
	With Riverbend Orchestra	
Preaching of the Word		Dr. Roy Hargrave
Prayer		Dr. Roy Hargrave
Offertory Music	“Holy Is the Lord”	Andrew Yancey
Closing Song	“Holy Is the Lord”	Heyward Evans/Praise Team

Worship at South Woods Baptist Church

An Interview with Phil Newton and Jim Carnes

1. How do you view the corporate worship service?

Phil: God created us to worship. Until a person engages in worship then he has not comprehended his reason for existence. Corporate worship prepares us for the extended corporate worship in heaven. I'm currently preaching through Revelation where I see the theme of worship return over and over. It's always corporate worship in view rather than private or even family worship. When fellow believers gather with the same heart and purpose to glory in the Lord through passionate worship, more than anything else in this life, it gives us a foretaste of heaven.

2. What are the key elements of corporate worship?

Phil: Worship is acceptable only if it takes place "in spirit and in truth." Therefore, the involvement of mind, heart, and emotions in communion with God's Spirit through the revelation of Holy Scripture is necessary for any periods of worship. So we think of prayer, thanksgiving, praise, confession, reading of Scripture, exposition of Scripture, attentive listening to God's Word, singing of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs," the Lord's Supper, confession of faith, the declaration of the gospel, giving, and silent meditation as elements of worship. Aspects of these elements posture the mind and heart in humility to think upon the Lord rightly, and offer to Him the glory due to His name.

3. What has to happen for the church to truly worship?

Phil: Believers must agree together upon the truth of Holy Scripture, and have a mind inclined to obey the revelation of God. The affections must be set upon the Lord. A disjointed, fractious congregation can go through motions of worship without worshiping. Both those leading and the congregation must recognize something of the seriousness of approaching a holy God with all of the weakness, sinfulness, and failures of our collective lives. We are broken and weak people daring to come before an altogether holy God through the merits of His Son and our Redeemer. Humility marks worship.

Those involved in worship leadership help to mark the tenor of the congregation toward participation in worship. Do the worship leaders actually worship or do they perform? Do they lead in worship or seek to manipulate the congregation into expressing certain outwardly acceptable forms? Worshipers lay aside the things that distract their senses from tasting and seeing that the Lord is good. Joyful worship flows out of recognizing the largeness

of God's grace toward us. This cannot be manufactured by following a neat script. It really demands congregational participation, recognizing that the whole church offers something to the corporate worship.

4. The two of you have served together for 12 years. What kind of dynamic has that provided as you lead your congregation in worship?

Phil: Sometimes I think that Jim knows what I'm thinking as well as myself. He and I have had so many discussions on spiritual and theological issues, often involving interpretive discussion on specific biblical texts, that we both really have a sense of where the other is heading when leading in worship through music or preaching. We regularly team-teach so we both profit from one another's study. We don't consider our leadership on Sundays as a weekly performance. Rather, we sense our accountability to God for leading His people in worship. While Jim plans the Scripture readings and music for our services, it is rare that I make a change in what he has planned, simply because he has a keen sense of where I'm heading with a particular text for preaching. I provide him with a text and title, and then he supplies the rest. Occasionally, he will ask me about where I might be heading with a sermon just to clarify a hymn or reading. He studies the text, and meditates on it so that he has a good idea of the richness of hymnody that goes along with the theme of my sermon text as well as related biblical texts for corporate worship. I think that the congregation benefits from the longevity of the two of us working together for so many years. There's no sense of competition with each other. We love and appreciate the gifts that God has entrusted to each, and value the partnership in ministry with our church.

5. How does a church staff get started in preparing for worship?

Phil: First, planning ahead is important. I did not recognize this for many years. Thus too many of the services that I led appeared thrown together in a disjointed fashion. Second, the pastor's preaching sets the stage for the worship service. It is important that the various elements of worship relate to a common theme so that the congregation focuses more clearly on the Lord. This requires that the pastor plan ahead in his preaching. I recommend that he plan at least three months in advance so that those involved in other aspects of leading in worship will have ample time to secure appropriate music (or even write music). Third, in our case, Jim lays out the worship service, sends me a copy, and I check it to make sure that I think all fits well. This allows time for adjustments before the service. Finally, after having the order of worship printed in the Sunday bulletin, I try to go over everything to make sure that all is in order and that we've not left something dangling. Jim and I often double-check with each other in this regard.

6. **You both strongly insist that the regular exposition of God’s Word is an essential aspect of worship. What do you do personally in this area to facilitate worship, and how have you trained your church to consider preaching as worship?**

Phil: Often in Baptist circles, we speak of the worship service as the time that we sing together and offer a couple of prayers. The time of preaching is separate. We worship and we preach; and the two never meet! But that is a false dichotomy. Preaching is central to worship in that when the Scripture is expounded, the doctrines that enable us to think rightly on the Lord are exposed clearly to our minds. We’re able to concentrate more clearly on some aspect of God’s character or work. Just as when we sing, we rehearse vocally the same doctrines that we hear during the exposition of God’s Word, so that our minds are lifted beyond the rat-race to think clearly and affectionately on the Lord. That gives way to expressions of praise and prayers of confession or dependence or trust.

Because our worship services are planned according to the theme of the exposition, then for the half-hour leading to the exposition, the reading of Scripture, singing of hymns, and praying focuses on the same theme as the exposition. By this time, hearts are often full and ready to burst in praise! I know that this is the case with me personally. I desire, and pray to worship as I preach. If I’m worshipping as I preach, then my congregation more likely joins me. If I’m merely giving a good lecture, that doesn’t have the same impact as when passionately expounding the revelation of God. We try to reinforce with our congregation that the worship continues during the sermon. Jim and I both work at transitioning from one element of worship to another without it being disjointed. We want the theme of worship to pervade everything in the service.

7. **How do you select the musical contributions to worship?**

Jim: My approach is thematic. I read the text and try to consider its theological implications; then I access my memory of hymns and try to recall those that relate to the theological themes. I always attempt to relate the texts of the hymns and the text of Scripture; differing musical genres can affect the mood of the service, but I try not to be overly influenced by them.

8. **Various musical genres dominate church worship services among evangelicals. How have you approached this with your own congregation?**

Jim: Our church is fairly conservative when it comes to musical styles; although we do employ a blended worship style. We have mixed in some contemporary music with the traditional hymns, but not many, yet. Since I am editing a new hymnal I have incorporated more of the old, unfamiliar hymns

than the new, unfamiliar choruses. I am working with some of our congregation to learn some newer hymns along with some different instrumentation but it has been slow progress, mostly on my part. As to a particular musical genre we lean more to classically oriented music. I have told the story many times about visiting a church in Texas (25 years ago, or more) where the soloist whistled a country western tune for the special music. No offense, but I am not ready to go there yet!

9. You include responsive readings each week. What part does the public reading of Scripture have in your times of worship?

Jim: The public reading of Scripture plays an enormously important part in the order of worship. I believe that true worship is a response to the revelation of God through His written Word; and I believe that true worship at South Woods will happen when the congregation responds by the help of the Holy Spirit to God's revealed Word; so I try to incorporate as much Scripture as time allows. Since I take a thematic approach all of the texts relate to the sermon in one way or another.

10. How far in advance do you plan your worship services?

Jim: As far in advance as my pastor supplies me with his schedule for preaching. Phil has been very gracious in giving me texts and titles for anywhere from two to six months, sometimes longer. That helps in an enormous way. We have a small, but very capable adult choir but I still need several weeks, if not a month of choir practices to feel proficient with particular anthems; so long range planning is a necessity. I have learned to be very flexible over the years because there are always unplanned exigencies that can throw off the schedule.

11. Who is involved in your worship planning and preparation?

Phil and Jim: Primarily the two of us. Periodically, the Elders are questioned about future topics or books of the Bible and they offer suggestions for future studies. They, also, discuss the times and contents of worship, offering their thoughts and/or concerns. Recently we had a discussion about changing the opening part of the order of service to include a more focused time of adoration of our Lord, and/or, a time of more serious attention to confession of sin. It was an encouraging dialogue that led to a change in the way we have been doing things. Obviously, all vocalists and instrumentalists need to be included in any preparation time, and they are. Even though all involved know about the planned Call to Worship and any special music or anthem, I still email the orders of service at the beginning of the week to see if any changes need to be made. Planning and preparation along with flexibility are essential. ☺

Sample Worship Service

From South Woods Baptist Church, Memphis, TN

Morning Worship

January 7, 2007

Welcome and Announcements

Scripture Reading Psalm 69:1-18 Ben Cripps

Call to Worship “The King of Love My Shepherd Is” Choir

Hymn 493 “It Is Well with My Soul” Congregation

Congregation Confession of Sin

Lord God, eternal and almighty Father:

We acknowledge before your holy majesty that we are poor sinners, conceived and born in guilt and in corruption, prone to do evil, unable of our own power to do good.

Because of our sin, we endlessly violate your holy commandments.

But, O Lord, with heartfelt sorrow we repent and turn away from all our offenses. We condemn ourselves and our evil ways, with true sorrow asking that your grace will relieve our distress.

Have compassion on us, most gracious God, Father of mercies, for the sake of your son Jesus Christ our Lord.

And in removing our guilt, also grant us daily increase of the grace of your Holy Spirit, and produce in us the fruits of holiness and of righteousness pleasing in your sight: Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. (Adapted from John Calvin's *Liturgy of 1543*)

Pastoral Prayer

Hymn 432 “From Every Stormy Wind That Blows” Congregation

Responsive Reading Psalm 27

Hymn 348 “Hiding in Thee” Congregation

Message in Music “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” Choir / Flute

Message Dr. Phil Newton

*“The Seventh Seal: Quiet before the Storm”
(Revelation 8:1-12)*

Hymn 466 “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” Congregation

Worship with Tithes and Offerings

Benediction

Worship at Grace Heritage Church

Paul Stith and Stan Reeves

What we do in worship at Grace Heritage Church has come together over three years of discussion and is still, in some senses, in process as we grow both in numbers and in resources. Some involved in this process have known the traditional aspects of a “church service” in Southern Baptist life, while others are more recently converted and bring little or no baggage to the table. All have a desire to jettison certain aspects of church life that have emerged in recent years, while embracing a renewed fervor for genuine worship that engages both the mind and the heart. Springing forth from these desires is a commitment to worship that is:

1. Comprehensible
2. Simple
3. Bible-saturated
4. God-centered

Comprehensible

Everyone is looking for answers to their brokenness and all that comes as a result of being fallen people living in a fallen world, although not necessarily with the light of the Scriptures. Therefore, the church is not to be driven by the likes and opinions of the world, but neither is it to be a closed society of secret handshakes and confusing terminology. Without compromising one word of truth we have endeavored to explain what we do and why we do it in language that communicates.

One method of doing this is found in the structure of our worship guide or bulletin. We borrowed the format of this bulletin from another church and modified it for our own purposes. We do not have hymnals or a projector, so we print song lyrics in our bulletin. The wide-page format gives us room to put marginal comments about different aspects of worship. When we celebrate communion, the bulletin explains in writing what the supper is for and who may participate. Marginal notes allow us to explain potentially confusing lyrics. Since the bulletin contains lyrics as well as catechism questions and Scripture readings, it also becomes a useful resource in family worship.

Secondly, we try to think carefully about the “glue” that holds different parts of worship together and how we might express those things in language that anyone can understand. Rather than simply starting at the appointed time, we begin by reminding those gathered that God has initiated a relationship with us and our

appropriate response is to worship Him. Therefore we are not gathered to witness an elaborate performance but to participate in an encounter with the living God.

Simple

Our emphasis upon simplicity began from necessity. We did not have facilities, instruments, or equipment. We sang together from basic printed lyrics accompanied by a guitar.

Today, sound equipment allows us to communicate with a larger group and a keyboard provides expanded instrumental options, but simplicity is still the guide for what we do. There is no attempt to lure a crowd with bigger and better music. While we want to do what we do with excellence, we resist cluttering simple elements of worship with something more complex for the sake of appealing to the high-tech appetites of this generation. Our hope is that meaningful content will lead us to an experience that complex media can only simulate.

This emphasis also allows for parents of small children to worship together and to teach their children about corporate worship. Since there is no elaborate production to interrupt, parents feel welcome to keep their children with them. Wiggly or crying children can, however, be a distraction. To accommodate this reality, we have an adjacent room that allows space for moving about and correcting children in a non-distracting way while still hearing and participating in every aspect of the worship time.

While we provide child-care for infants and preschoolers, we do not provide a separate children's church during worship. We believe that making Sunday "the most exciting day of the week for your child" is a miracle we simply cannot perform. Neither is this the task to which we have been called. We are called to proclaim Christ; "warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28 ESV). We admit that children do not always understand every word that we use, nor do they comprehend every concept that is presented from the Bible. At the same time, we believe this philosophy sends a critical message to both parents and children alike. Since the preaching of the Bible is a primary means of grace to bring people to maturity in Christ, we hope to engender a confidence in the Scriptures by having everyone gather under this transforming influence. This is not to imply that children cannot be taught or exhorted separately in other contexts. It is, however, a significant way to say that Bible-saturated worship is critical to spiritual health, regardless of age.

Finally, we believe simple worship is more transferable to other contexts and cultures. Because we live in a university context we have a tremendous opportunity to model healthy worship and church life to international students and other international scholars. Simple worship focuses on essentials rather than trappings that require a large investment in equipment and infrastructure and avoids bringing along needless cultural baggage. Visiting missionaries and other international workers have observed to us that our approach to worship can be implemented anywhere.

Bible-saturated

No one would disagree that our content should be biblical. We are not allowed to do what merely seems right or what satisfies our personal whims. The distance between God and His creatures is so great that the only acceptable way of approaching God in worship must be revealed to us by God Himself. This principle protects us from idolatrous worship and focuses our energies on those activities through which God has called us to draw near. But this simple reality is often overlooked today, so we make a tremendous effort to ensure that the form of our worship is biblically defined and that our songs, readings, and prayers are soaked in biblical truth. These principles lead us to shape our worship with the following four-fold structure:

1. The Lord calls us into His presence;
2. The Lord cleanses us from our sins;
3. The Lord consecrates us by His Word;
4. The Lord blesses us and sends us out.

1. The Lord calls us into His presence

We begin and end worship with Scripture, so as to give tangible reminders that God has the first and the last word in this event. The call also declares that God has initiated this relationship with us and we have come together solely to respond to Him in ways that He has commanded. He has the right to tell us how to worship, and we desire not only to please Him in our obedience but also to benefit in every possible way from worshipping Him rightly.

Singing is an important part of worship because we are commanded to sing to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Songs are chosen in this part of worship because they teach us of the character, worth, or glory of God. One admitted weakness in our singing is a notable lack of singing the Psalms. Thankfully, as noted earlier, we are still in process!

Another important aspect of worship is public prayer. We are attempting to model biblical prayers throughout the different aspects of worship. This particular portion includes a prayer of adoration that recognizes the greatness and majesty of God.

2. The Lord cleanses us from our sins

Having come into the presence of God at His invitation can only leave us in recognition of the stark contrast between His holiness and our sinfulness. In this portion of worship we sing songs and read Scripture that remind us of the gospel and its provision for our needs. This provides another opportunity to speak in a

comprehensible way to all present. Many of us have heard the popular demand that worship should leave the participant “feeling better.” But on what basis are they to feel better? What is the remedy for sin and its consequences?

Our goal in considering sin is not to drive people to morbid introspection and leave them there, as if feeling badly about sin somehow takes it away. But neither is the goal to pretend that sin does not exist or to teach management techniques, as if an hour of upbeat singing and moralistic teaching will somehow help us survive the brokenness of the coming week.

We hope to teach everyone present that the remedy for sin and all its consequences is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every week we are encouraged to run to Christ in repentance and faith, believing the gospel again and again. Sometimes a pastoral prayer that models confession helps others to understand this part of worship. From time to time we will read a prayer of confession found in *Valley of Vision*. More often we spend time in silent confession of sins. We hope this part of worship provides a model and calls individuals to do this in private worship on a regular basis. It also calls us to deal with our sin in a biblical way, as opposed to the man-made methods and strategies that pour forth from man-centered philosophies.

3. The Lord consecrates us by His Word

Paul calls us in 1 Timothy 4:13 to give attention to the public reading of Scripture, so this section begins with a reading from a larger passage of Scripture. The choice of these passages is based upon multiple purposes. In the weeks before we began a series of sermons in the gospel of Mark, we read through Mark as a congregation. While preaching through Mark, we are reading through large sections of Isaiah, which Mark often quotes, alludes to, or presents as fulfilled prophecy.

This section of worship also allows for an extended time of prayer revolving around thanksgiving and intercession. We do not have a mid-week prayer service as a church, so this gives us an opportunity to pray at length for needs in our congregation and to model thankfulness to God.

So far in worship we have participated in prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. We have also sung songs that teach, encourage, confess truth, and rejoice in the truth of the gospel. We then come to what we see as the center of worship: the proclamation of the Word of God. We believe this because the Bible places so much emphasis upon the Word of God proclaimed.

Someone once said that they attend such and such a church when they feel the need to worship but another church across town when they want to hear the Bible preached. This false dichotomy between singing as worship and preaching as something else must be resisted. One way we do this is through printed statements in the bulletin. We also emphasize from the pulpit that we continue in worship by gathering around the Word of God to hear it proclaimed. Participation at this point is *no less active than when praying or singing*. At the end of the

sermon we press this point again by having a time of quiet meditation, during which the congregation may reflect on what they have heard and how they might be responsible to respond.

We also include the offering at this point because it is a response to God and recognition of His provision and a confession of our dependence upon Him. We often explain that the offering is more than a means of financing the church; it is an act of worship and submission to God. After the offering, we include songs of response to punctuate truths we have been learning.

4. The Lord blesses us and sends us out

We do not have a traditional “invitation” at Grace Heritage Church. We see no precedent for it in the Scriptures, and we do not want to confuse conversion with walking to the front of a room. At the same time we do not want to remove the sense of urgency from God’s command that all men everywhere should repent and believe the gospel. Consequently, we see the entire sermon as an invitation to respond to Christ and encourage all present to do so. We also make our elders available at the end of worship to answer questions or provide counsel to any who may have need.

As mentioned above, God has the first and last word in worship. Therefore we end with a benediction, usually quoted directly from Scripture. This reminds us of God’s claim upon our lives as well as His provision for us to “walk worthy of the calling” with which we have been called. Lord willing, we will proceed into the rest of the day and the coming week both experiencing and holding forth the hope of the gospel.

God-centered

In conclusion, our deep hope is that our worship is God-centered. We understand that we were created through Him and for Him. He is the center of all things. Consequently we are charged to resist the temptation to make worship about what people are *feeling* at the end of the day.

However, we reformed folk can have the tendency to be so structurally orthodox that at the end of the day people are feeling *nothing*. This does not seem to be the doxological pattern of the Scriptures. Both testaments reveal great emotion in worship; David repeatedly expresses rapturous delight in God, and Paul can barely speak of the work of Christ without breaking forth in praise charged with emotion. And we are quite familiar with the command to worship in both spirit and truth. Certainly, emotion for emotion’s sake is not the goal. But when God is truly at the center of worship, both our heads and our hearts will be enflamed with no extra-biblical stimulus necessary. ☞

Sample Worship Service

From Grace Heritage Church, Auburn, AL

Worship Order ~ January 7, 2007

The Lord Calls Us Into His Presence

Psalm 32:1-4, 8-11

Hymn *Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It*

Prayer of Praise

Hymn *A Mighty Fortress is our God*

The Lord Cleanses Us of Our Sins

Song *Jesus, I Come*

Remembering the Gospel — Psalm 32:5-7

Silent Confession of Sins

Scripture Reading — Luke 15:17-24

Song *Isn't He Good*

The Lord Consecrates Us By His Word

Scripture Reading — Mark 8:1-30

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Proclamation of the Word — Mark 8:31-9:1

Reflection and Response

Communion

Worship Through Giving to God

Hymn *Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken*

Hymn *Before the Throne of God Above*

The Lord Blesses Us and Sends Us Out

Benediction — Acts 20:32

To view a sample of the bulletin see: www.graceheritage.org/bulletins.html
For a template see: www.graceheritage.org/bulletin_model.doc

News

Southern Baptist Founders Conference

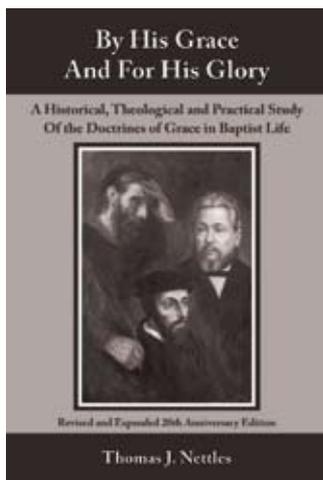
Make plans now to attend the **2007 Southern Baptist Founders Conference**, June 26–29, hosted by Bethel Baptist Church in Owasso, OK. This will be the 25th anniversary of the conference. The theme will be *“God’s Truth Abideth Still: Confronting Postmodernism”* with keynote speaker Dr. David Wells.

Founders Fellowship Breakfast

The Founders Fellowship Breakfast will be held on June 12, 2007 at the SBC in San Antonio, TX. Plan to join us in the Alamo Ballroom A/B/C/D in the Marriott Riverwalk at 6:30 AM. Voddie Baucham, Pastor of Preaching at the Grace Family Baptist Church in Spring, TX, will be speaking on “Southern Baptists at Sardis.” Register online at: www.founders.org/conferences/ffb/

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