

The Whys of Worship

Sorting Out the Circumstances of Worship

Taken from a Bible Study by Ken Puls
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Tonight, as we prepare for a time of prayer, I want to think again with you about worship. Throughout our study of worship we have focused our attention especially on understanding our gathered worship here at Grace. We have been asking questions. Why do we come together for corporate worship? What are we to do when we gather together? How can we know that we are worshipping God in the right way? We have considered both the **outward elements** that comprise the content of our worship, as well as the **inward realities** that should take place in the hearts and lives of God's people as we worship. In our time this evening, I want to take a closer look at the details of our services and ask the question: Why do we do what we do in our times of worship? How can we identify and sort out the **circumstances** of worship?

Now first, a definition—What do we mean by “circumstances of worship”?

How are they different from what we termed “the elements of worship”?

The elements again are those activities, commanded and affirmed by God in His Word, that comprise the content of our worship services: They include:

The **reading of Scripture**

Faithful expository **preaching** and **teaching of Scripture**

Prayer

Confessing our faith

Singing psalms and **hymns** and **spiritual songs**

Baptism and the **Lord's Supper**

Giving tithes and **offerings**

Fellowship of the saints

But God's Word does not regulate every aspect of our worship.

Some things are left to **prudence** and what the Puritans called the “light of nature.”

Now what do we mean by “prudence” and the “light of nature”?

Prudence is the practical application of wisdom that allows us to weigh the consequences of our actions and avoid sin and danger.

Proverbs chapter one speaks of **prudence** where it gives the purpose for the book:

Proverbs 1:2–4 To know wisdom and instruction,
 to understand words of insight,
 to receive instruction in wise dealing,
 in righteousness, justice, and equity;
 to give **prudence** to the simple,

We need to learn prudence:

Proverbs 8:5 O simple ones, learn prudence;
 O fools, learn sense.

If wisdom is knowing **how** to apply knowledge, prudence (or discernment) is knowing **when** to apply knowledge. Wisdom is in the mind; prudence is worked out in our decisions and actions.

The Light of Nature relates both to common sense and to the providence of God concerning the time, place, culture— **the circumstances** in which He in His wisdom has placed us.

So when we look to God’s Word to order our worship, some things are clear by specific command—such as the command to preach the Word of God (2 Timothy 4:2). Some things are clear by precedent or example—such as singing a hymn at the close of the Lord’s Supper (Matthew 26:30)—but some things must be ordered by Christian prudence and the light of nature.

These would include such things as:

1. What time of day we should meet
2. What language we should use in worship
3. Where we should meet (place)
4. What kind of building we should use (pews or chairs / color of the carpet)
5. How long our services should be
6. What specific order of worship we should use
7. What kind of musical instruments we should use
8. What technology we should use (amplification / projection screens / lighting)
9. How many songs should we sing

God has given us liberty in how we work out the circumstances or incidentals of worship. Because of this freedom, there are many forms and styles of worship, across the world and down through history. Depending on our language and culture and the way we put the elements and incidentals together into a service, our worship might look quite different from another church—even another church that is committed to obeying God’s Word and regulating its worship according to Scripture.

All our efforts to worship to God must always operate within the boundary of His Word. We are not free to include anything that is possible or even anything that we think might be useful.

Even in details or incidentals where we have a measure of freedom or creativity, we must be careful and thoughtful to stay in bounds where God has given us light in His Word.

So how do we sort through all this? How do we distinguish between elements and circumstances? And how do we structure them in worship in ways that are helpful and God-honoring?

Review of the Regulative Principle

I have said before that when we ask questions about worship our first thoughts must be to look to God's Word. For this we can take our cue from our confession. Our Confession of Faith (The *London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*) begins in the opening statement in chapter one by saying: "The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience."

That's where we must begin if we are going to rightly understand God's will and walk together and worship together in obedience. Worship is not something contrived by our fruitful imaginations or fertile brainstorming. It is something to be shaped and offered in accordance with God's commands and revealed will in His Word.

Chapter 22 of the Confession says specifically about worship:

"The light of nature shows that there is a God, who is Lord and is sovereign over all. He is just, good, and does good to all; and so He is to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and all the soul, and with all the strength. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures." [1689 LBC / Chapter 22; Paragraph 1]

Often this is called the **Regulative Principle** of worship. It simply means that our worship is to be regulated and guided by the Word of God. The Bible sets the boundaries and defines the way in which we are to come before God in worship. We don't design worship around our good ideas and good intentions. Worship is something God commands and regulates in His Word.

In the **Old Testament** God gave very detailed instructions about worship. He commanded that Israel worship Him through specific festivals and sacrifices in an earthly temple. They involved ceremonies, rituals and processions, rich in meaning, that pointed the people to Jesus and foreshadowed what Jesus would one day accomplish on the cross. In the **New Testament** we don't see the same level of detail and emphasis on outward forms of worship. But we do see clear instruction as we are taught to worship God "in Spirit and in Truth" (John 4:23).

So how do we sort through our questions about worship? What can we do? What could or should we include? What can't we do? What must we not include?

We need to take our questions first to the Word of God.

Here is a grid I find helpful in thinking about worship.

Seven Questions we should ask—

- 1) Has God **clearly commanded** that we do this in worship?

Where God has commanded, we should and need to obey. We want to worship in ways that God has directed in His Word. But there is an additional question we should ask to help clarify this, especially if we are reading instructions for God's people about worship in the Old Testament—

- 2) If we have a clear command in Scripture, **does it apply to the New Testament Church** and respect the distinction between worship in the Old Testament (that foreshadowed the coming of Christ) and worship in the New (that exalts in the fulfillment of Christ's death, burial and resurrection from the dead)?

There are many commands, for example, about bringing sacrifices (Leviticus 1–7) and observing festivals (Leviticus 23), and going up to the temple in Jerusalem. These are part of the Old Covenant ceremonial law that served God's purposes in their day to foreshadow the redemptive work of Christ. But further revelation in the New Testament explains that they were but a "shadow and copy of heavenly things" (Hebrews 8:5).

Hebrews 8:6 But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.

And so Hebrews 8 concludes:

Hebrews 8:13 In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

We want to do those things that God has commended in His Word concerning worship that pertain to God's people this side of the cross in light of the Old Testament foundations AND the New Testament fulfillment.

- 3) Has God **clearly forbidden** that we do this in worship?

There again, we want to be obedient to His Word and not sin by doing what He has forbidden. For example, read in the Ten Commandments—

Exodus 20:4–6 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, ...

Some have tried to make two commandments of this. One—that we should not make representational art. And two—that we should not worship God through representation art. But other Scriptures make clear that this just one commandment.

There was much representation art in the tabernacle and temple (as we shall see in our study through Exodus). What God here forbids is using images (like paintings or photos or sculptures) as a means to worship Him.

So we would not create a sculpture of Jesus or paint His picture and place it on the platform, and use it as a means to worship Him and show Him our affection.

- 4) If He has not clearly commanded or forbidden it, is there a **biblical precedent** or **example** we should follow?

This could include following the example of Jesus and the apostles in singing a hymn at the close of the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:30) or of the early church in taking up a special offering for benevolence needs (1 Corinthians 16:1; Philippians 4:15–18).

- 5) If He has not commanded or forbidden it, is it a **circumstance** that we should order by prudence and the light of nature?

- 6) If it is a circumstance, **will it distract us** from doing those things that God has clearly commanded, **or will it help us** to do what God has commanded?

In other words, will it help us carry out the elements of worship in spirit and in truth, or will make our coming to God in worship more difficult?

If it seems to be helpful, or at least, not unhelpful—

- 7) (If it is a circumstance) what are the **arguments for and against it**?

What are the advantages or disadvantages of including it?

Let me give you just a few examples of some circumstances of worship that we have had to address moving into our building here:

1. **Sound and Audio**

Should we use mics and amplification or not? There are advantages and disadvantages:

Advantage: Allows everyone to hear, even with many people in the room
 Allows us to easily record our services
 Allows us to mix and balance the sound during the singing

Disadvantage: It ties us to microphones in order to be heard

Because our worship center is designed for amplification—we need to amplify. Speakers project the sound in the room. The carpet, padded chairs and sound panels all help to balance the sound and absorb excess sound. So, unless there is a small group in the room, all sitting very close together, it is hard to hear without mics.

For prayer requests and corporate prayer (on Wednesday nights) or questions and discussion (in Sunday School or Sunday evening service) we have wireless mics available so everyone can be heard and everything can be recorded.

2. Use of Lighting

Lighting, of course, is important. It helps us to see and it helps direct our focus. During the welcome and during the preaching, we want the lights up where we can see one another and see our Bibles and notes. When we watch videos (such as testimonies before baptisms) on the screen, we often dim the lights to make the screen easier to see, and to make everything else in the room less of a distraction. In our singing, we often include the use of colored lights on the platform. In part the reason for this is aesthetic, to match the color backgrounds on the slides. And in part it helps pull back the lights on the platform to draw attention to the words and make them easier to see.

3. Use of a Projection Screen (especially for our singing)

Should we even use a projection screen in our services? Again, there are advantages and disadvantages:

Disadvantages: No longer have a hymnal to hold (to some this is an advantage)
(Long ago people use to bring their own hymnals as well as Bibles)
Don't have music (parts) to sing
Like much of technology—only useful when it works!
Operator must keep up with slide changes

Advantages: Hands free during singing / no page turning
Can look up rather than down at book (better posture for singing)
Can more easily introduce new songs (not tied to songs in a book)

There are other advantages beyond projecting the words to songs for singing. Because we use cameras to record and live-stream our services, we can project the camera view, when helpful, on the screen (as we do for baptisms to make it easier for everyone to see). We can also show video, such as recorded testimonies before baptisms.

Thinking Through Circumstances

Behind all our deliberations and choices about circumstances is the desire to serve best the needs of the congregation and the glory of God. How can we best use our gifts and resources to facilitate worship and fellowship and discipleship here in this place?

Paul says in—

Romans 15:5–6 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may **with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

God's glory is the prime concern in all things we do—as we speak with one another, as we walk together— and especially our times of worship.

1 Corinthians 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, **do all to the glory of God.**

But Paul teaches also, in 1 Corinthians 14, where he speaks about gathered worship—

1 Corinthians 14:26 What then, brothers? 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.**

Our concern is for one another in the body of Christ—that all we do is **edifying**—building up one another.

And Paul makes note in 1 Corinthians 14:23–25 that there will be unbelievers and outsiders who will come among us. We want all that we do to be a good **witness** of our love for God and one another. We are to order our service and conduct our worship in such a way that those outside of Christ who see us worship will be convicted and will know that God is really with us.

The Details of Worship at Grace

There are a great many details involving the circumstances of our worship here at Grace that are coordinated each week by our Worship Team. Some who serve are more obvious:

The Pastors

The Praise Team and Instrumentalists

These are up on the platform giving leadership and assistance. But much involving the details of worship takes place behind the scenes. Back in our Sound Booth we usually have 4 or 5 people serving:

Sound Techs (1 at the sound board and 1 listening in the room)

ProPresenter Operator (for projection and video)

Lighting Tech

Camera and Live-Stream Operator

Along with those in the sound booth, we have many who serve in other areas: opening the building, setting up signs, welcoming guests, ushering, translation and interpretation into Spanish... The list goes on.

We are blessed at Grace to have many who are skilled and able and willing to serve. I encourage you to pray for them and encourage them in their ministries.

But in closing tonight, before we go to a time of prayer, I want to mention some ways we all, as a **congregation**, can make the most of our times of worship. There are some details that you can help with every time we meet.

How to Help in Times of Gathered Worship

1. **Be here!** Encourage others to be here!

When you notice people missing from our services, call and tell them you missed them.

When Pastor Tom prepares a message for us to hear, he spends much time in study and prayer. It's like a chef preparing a sumptuous meal for our spiritual well-being and enjoyment. It's discouraging to set out a feast for the church family and those who are expected and invited to the table don't come. They miss out! And they lose valuable opportunity for the care and nurture and strengthening of their souls.

Some come! Come early! Stay long! Enjoy conversation and fellowship with God's people. And enjoy the bounty God gives to us in times of gathered worship.

2. **Be intentional** in your participation—enter in!

Worship is a verb—an action—so sing, prayer, listen, submit, expect...

Don't come just to watch—join in and participate. Don't come just to hear—come ready to listen, obey, follow and do. Expect God to speak to you through His Word. Come with a readiness to hear and submit to His Word.

3. Aim to **stay focused** in your attention

Try to minimize distractions and keep your mind on what we are doing in worship. Do what you can to encourage others by your participation. Aim not to be a distraction. Avoid getting up and going out during the service.

Now I know that there are legitimate reasons for leaving your seat for a time. Moms and Dads need to care for little ones. Sometimes they need taken out for discipline or so they don't disrupt the service.

But much of the time, I'm afraid, our moving around is unnecessary. And it communicates that we don't really get what is going on around us. God is here. His people are here. This time, this meeting is sacred—set apart. This is communion, not a convention or a sporting event.

If an angel from heaven were to appear in this room, with a flaming sword and bright raiment, and he began speaking the Word of God, would you leave? Would you get up to step out for a drink of water? Brothers and sisters, we don't need an angel from heaven. **God is here!** We have His sure and certain Word. And it is faithfully read and proclaimed.

So aim to stay focused, as much as you can, and communicate to others around you what you hold to be worthy of your focus and undivided attention.

4. Above all—**pray**

That God would be present among us

That He would work in the power of His Spirit

That He would change lives

That He would help us rightly understand and respond to His Word in repentance and faith and obedience

Lets go now to a time of prayer.

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