

Principles of Gathered worship

God has revealed to us through the Bible a number of theological principles to hold to when we gather for worship together. Some of these principles appear to be in tension. Here, three pairs of theological pillars will be considered.

1. Worship is for God and Worship is for us

We worship God for who God is and what God has done. Huge amounts of the Bible, including many Psalms (e.g. Psalm 96) make this clear. As examples, on Sundays we sing songs and give offerings as acts of worship to God. At the same time, however, we know that God does not *need* our worship. God calls for it, God deserves it and God is worthy of it, but God is never in need of it. Our best and brightest acts of worship are important, but they never provide something to God that God was lacking (2 Chronicles 2:5-6). God lacks nothing.

But *we* need our worship to God. Individually we need to worship God because it keeps us humble, points our hearts in the right direction (towards God), and can prevent us from worshipping other things (1 Kings 18:20-39, Isaiah 6:1-5, Matthew 6:24, John 20:24-29). Additionally, in gathered worship we encourage and challenge each other (Colossians 3:16, Hebrews 10:24-25). On Sundays we can do this through singing, announcements (creating community with each other), supper and dinner together.

2. In Worship we come to God and In Worship God comes to us

Through Jesus our High Priest, we can approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:16). We can come to God in our gathered worship with all our pain and hurt and grief. As many have in Biblical times, we can come as we are (Psalm 130:1-2, Psalm 22:1-2, Joshua 7:7-9). On Sundays we often do this in times of prayer, silence and reflection.

But our worship doesn't end there. We come as we are but we are not left as we are. We bring our subjective experience of reality to God, and God responds with his objective truth. A gathering where God's word is not heard, and people simply talk *about* God runs the risk of misunderstanding and disobedience (Genesis 2:16-17, 3:1). But when people hear *from* God, true worship takes place (Exodus 19:17-91). In Psalm 73, the troubled and angry Asaph encounters God (and the sacrificial system) in the temple, and it's this response from God that helps him resolve his inner turmoil.

3. Worship is orderly and Worship is free

Worship is to be orderly in the New Testament Church (1 Corinthians 14:26-33, 39-40). However, at other occasions in the Bible, free expressions of worship are also commended (2 Samuel 6:12-23). Balancing principles of order and freedom is delicate, but some suggestions are offered: (1) Every individual is free in their response during worship, in their attendance at worship, to participate in leading worship (we encourage participation at NightChurch!), and in forming other gatherings to worship. (2) Some acts of freedom in gathered worship (e.g. loud personal drumming or calling out during the Bible reading) will affect others' freedom in unhelpful ways, and so we refrain from these. (3) Prayerful planning and order, practice of instruments and selection of songs, and careful sermon preparation provide a context for free worship. Unprepared elements in gathered worship may seem "free" but more helpful freedom is found in spaces carefully created for that purpose. (3) The type and size of gathering are important considerations in striking this balance. In smaller gatherings of close friends, more freedom and flexibility is natural, but in larger, more formal gatherings, more order and preparation is often more helpful.