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**Corporate Worship – Position Paper**

**What**

At its heart, all worship is a **response.** Worship is a response to **who** God is and **what** He has done in every area of a believer’s life.

**Revelation & Response**:

In His grace, God has revealed Himself through creation, Scripture, and the person of Jesus Christ. Because God has revealed Himself, limited creatures like us can truly know Him. In response to the self-revelation of God, man is to respond rightly by honoring Him, enjoying Him, and proclaiming Him as Lord. To know God and to respond to Him rightly **glorifies** Him, which is the chief end of man.

**Forms of Worship:**

Singing, praying, reading Scripture, obedience, and thankfulness are all forms of worship. But importantly, all of life can and should be an act of worship. [[1]](#footnote-1) As those who have been saved from the wrath of God[[2]](#footnote-2) and brought into newness of life[[3]](#footnote-3), born-again believers are to respond to the Lord by orienting every aspect of their being in thankful worship.[[4]](#footnote-4) Everything that we do, say, or think in life should be grounded out of a worshipful response to God. Sipping coffee, changing diapers, and singing songs of praise are all worship if done in thankful response to God.

**Who He is and what He has done:**

Thankful worship is not sourced in us, but originates, is empowered, and directed to God alone. In Psalm 150, the closing piece of our biblical songbook, verse two says,

*“Praise him (God) for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness!”*

In this Psalm, God’s people are called to respond to God in worship and what they are responding to is God’s “excellent greatness” and His “mighty deeds.” Or to say it another way, **who God is** and **what He has done.** This is the pattern we see in all of Scripture, God revealing His character and doing mighty deeds, and then His people responding to Him with worship.

**Christ-Centered:**

Nowhere is **who God is** and **what He has done** better seen than in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Word made flesh who dwelt among men (Who God is, revealed) and our Redeemer who bore God’s wrath on our behalf and united us with Him (God’s greatest deed). Therefore, our worship is centered around responding to Jesus Christ and His Gospel work.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, in its simplest form, is that **through the person and work of Jesus, sinners are saved unto God.**

One aspect of salvation is the unification of believers with Christ and others in His body, the Church. In speaking of this, 1 Peter 2:10 says,

*“Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

Because of this unity with Christ and with other believers, there is a corporate identity that believers share.

**Corporate Worship:**

Corporate worship is “corporate” because it is done by the gathered body of Christ. It is impossible to do it alone. When the people of God gather corporately in worship, they are *together* responding to the Lord. They are unified in identity and confession, corporately responding to the one who deserves all praise.

When the gathered body gathers in worship, three main things happen: God is glorified, the Body of Christ is edified, and non-believers hear and see the Gospel displayed.

**Definition:**

Corporate worship is the local church’s **response** to who God is and what He has done, that **exalts** God, **edifies** the body, and **evangelizes** to the lost.

**Why**

**Exalt God**

The primary goal in corporate worship is to extol the praises of the Glorious God. He is supremely worthy of our praise and our enjoyment of Him magnifies His name.

**Made to Glorify**:

The created universe is all about glory. The deepest longing of the human heart and the deepest meaning of heaven and earth are summed up in this: the glory of God. The universe was made to show it, and we were made to see it and savor it. Nothing less will do. Seeing and savoring the Glory of God is what humans were made for.

*The heavens declare the Glory of God – Psalm 19:1*

**In the face of Christ:**

The most powerful display of God’s Glory is in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we glorify the Father by beholding the face of Christ. Corporate worship allows the gathered body to adore Christ together. He is their creator, sustainer, and redeemer, eternally worthy of adoration and praise.

*For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. – 2 Corinthians 4:6*

**Edify the Body**

Corporate worship also edifies the body by teaching, encouraging, and transforming them through the Spirit toward maturity in Christ.

**Horizontal Aspect to Worship:**

Although primarily vertical (directed to God) there is also a horizontal aspect to our corporate worship. Ephesians 5:18-19 says that we are to be filled with the Spirit,

*“Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.”*

And Colossians 3:16-17 says,

“*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”*

In these passages, Paul argues that one of the primary goals of corporate worship is to edify the whole church. In the assembly, we should do all things in order to build one another up. We sing to address God, yes, but also to teach and admonish one another. This is not to say that edification is more important than glorifying God, as if the two are in competition. But it does mean that even those corporate activities in which we address God directly—singing praises, giving thanks—should have an explicitly horizontal focus as well. Singing is for teaching. Praise is for instruction. Adoration is for admonishing.

**When the church gathers corporately for worship, edification happens in many ways:**

1. **The Church is unified:** When people worship together, they are united. When people sing together for example, they unite their breath. They unite their words. In certain situations, they will unite their physical gestures too—clapping and raising hands.

In worship, the whole person is engaged. In congregational worship, the whole person is engaged and united with the community around us. This practice takes on its greatest meaning in the church, where that unity shapes and reorients a covenant community to the story of the gospel. When the church sings a lament together, the words and music share the sense of sorrow and anguish of those who are suffering. When they celebrate communion together, the meal shared helps them emotionally taste hope and victory.

1. **The Church Teaches One-Another:** When the Church worships together, we teach theology. No matter what we may be intending when we do certain practices together, the act of worshipping together will naturally shape our knowledge of and affections toward God. This is why we must take the content and forms of our worship seriously. If we are teaching and admonishing one another through our worship[[5]](#footnote-5), we must worship in biblical and Christ-centered ways.
2. **The Church is Transformed:** Hand-in-hand in with teaching is transformation. Corporate worship engages the mind, shapes the affections, and outflows through the hands of the church on Sunday and throughout the week. The liturgy of the service (see pg. 4) plays a crucial role in maturing believers in Christ. Every aspect of a corporate worship service shapes the worshipper.
3. **The Church Encourages One-Another:** When we worship together, we encourage one another with the truth of the Gospel. The church, as a community of believers, serves as a source of support and encouragement in times of difficulty. When we worship together, we come alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing in their joys and sorrows. We encourage that sister in Christ who has had a death in her family recently and is mourning. We are lifting up the brother who has had a rough week at work and is struggling to lead his family well. Every aspect of a corporate worship service has the potential to encourage a believer right where they are at

**Evangelize the Lost**

Corporate worship also evangelizes the lost through how the church displays the light of Christ together.

**Manifold wisdom of God:**

The Church exists to display the manifold wisdom of God.[[6]](#footnote-6) The gathered body, in corporate worship, displays the manifold wisdom of God to those who are lost by teaching them gospel truths and modeling responsive and obedient lives.

The very act of believers coming together in unity, humility, and praise becomes a living testament to the transformative power of the Gospel. This visible demonstration can spark curiosity and inquiry among the unchurched, opening doors for evangelistic conversations.

**Teaching Gospel Truths:**

The content and forms of corporate worship play a crucial role in teaching gospel truths. The songs sung, the prayers offered, and the messages proclaimed during worship carry the message of redemption and grace. For the unchurched who may be present, these elements serve as a window into the core beliefs of the Faith.

**Who**

**The Local Church**:

A sinner who repents and trusts in Christ is born into a new family. The **universal church** is the family of God, made up of people from all time. place, culture, and tongue. This family becomes visible today in local churches. Though all believers in all times belong to the heavenly “assembly” of the universal church (Heb. 12:23), Jesus established the **local church** to show the world who his worshipers are. This means that being a Christian—a worshiper of God—entails identifying with God’s worshiping people in a local context. You have been adopted into his family. So, when you sit down to the dinner table of corporate worship, you do not do so alone. Since salvation is corporate, worship is corporate.

**The Gathered Body:** Corporate worship is done by the entire gathered body of a local church.

**When**

Whenever the **whole body** gathers.

A group of believers gathering together in their home midweek is not corporate worship. They may indeed be worshipping together as they gather, but corporate worship is **reserved** for when the whole body purposely gathers together to do so.

**How**

**Liturgy:**

The “liturgy” of a worship service are the elements, rhythms, focuses, and environmental factors of the service itself. Intentional crafting of the liturgy is important to fulfill the why of corporate worship (Extoling God, Edifying the Body, Evangelizing to the Lost).

**With a Shepherd’s Heart:**

All Liturgy should be planned, prepared, and done with a shepherd’s heart. A shepherd’s heart is one that intimately cares for the wellbeing of the flock of Christ. It is one that feeds, leads, and protects the flock with the same love that the head-shepherd, Jesus Christ, does.

It is crucial to understand that our liturgy will shape those who participate in it. The songs sung, the lighting in the room, the Word Preached, the font size of the lyrics on the screen, and all other conceivable factors of a service play a role in shaping worshippers.

**Transformative:**

We should see the church’s worship service—the whole thing, not just the sermon—as a mass discipling activity.

Mike Cosper says it well: “The gathering is not simply a single spiritual discipline; it is a host of them. It is a way of taking the experiences of prayer and worship, which we so often compartmentalize and individualize, and unifying them in the life of the congregation.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Since the gathering is such a powerful corporate discipling tool, we should treat liturgy with care.

Here’s how Bryan Chapell puts it: “Whether one intends it or not, our worship patterns always communicate something. Even if one simply goes along with what is either historically accepted or currently preferred, an understanding of the gospel inevitably unfolds. If a leader sets aside time for Confession of Sin (whether by prayer, or by song, or by scripture reading), then something about the gospel gets communicated. If there is no Confession in the course of the service, then something else is communicated—even though the message conveyed may not have been intended.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Gospel Shaped:**

Imagine a diamond ring. The order of a worship service acts like the prongs that hold up the gleaming jewel of the gospel. Our liturgy should support and undergird the message of God’s grace in Christ that we proclaim. Ideally, like the best prongs, the liturgy is unobtrusive—it gets out of the way so that the gospel shines bright and unhindered. Conversely, a poor liturgy is like a set of prongs that overshadow the diamond. The gem may still be present, but it is obscured. If a church is not careful, its order of service can muddle rather than highlight the good news.

To that end, Bryan Chapell surveyed several enduring liturgical forms from church history and summarized the main movements they share in common:[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. Recognition of God’s Character (Adoration)
2. Acknowledgement of Our Character (Confession)
3. Affirmation of Grace in Christ (Assurance)
4. Expression of Devotion (Thanksgiving)
5. Desire for Aid in Living for God (Petition and Intercession)
6. Acquiring Knowledge for Pleasing God (Instruction from God’s Word)
7. Living unto God with His Blessing (Charge and Benediction)

Although not a requirement for every service, incorporating all these main movements on a regular basis through the liturgy helps shape the congregation with the Gospel.

**Putting it in Practice:**

Practically, this looks like structuring the worship service to have a consistent liturgical flow week to week that looks like, and therefore teaches the Gospel, leading God’s people to be transformed by the Gospel. Although the terminology used to structure the flow of service can vary, it should be generally Gospel-shaped. Some examples are:

1. Adoration, Confession, Assurance, Instruction, Response
2. God, Man, Christ, Response
3. Creation, Fall, Redemption, Response
4. Reverence, Redemption, Renewal, Response

A Gospel-shaped service begins a high view of God, moves into articulating our need for God, then moves into the goodness of the Gospel, instructing the body in who God is and what He has done, and finally calls the Body to respond in worship, fellowship, and good works throughout the coming week.

In simple terms, **(1)** start with God, **(2)** show mankind’s need for God, **(3)** show how Jesus brings them to God, **(4)** and help God’s people respond to God in every area of life.

**Regulative Principle:**

God, by his Word, governs what the local church should do when it gathers. The Regulative Principle is a theological perspective that guides the liturgy of our church. It argues that the liturgical elements of our corporate worship gatherings should be derived directly from Scripture. While there is indeed freedom to express those elements with some cultural expression if a high view of Scripture and the right view of God is maintained, adding on new liturgical elements other than what is prescribed in Scripture runs in danger of being unhelpful to outright idolatrous. The elements are:

1. Congregational Singing
2. Preaching
3. Corporate Prayer
4. Scripture Reading
5. The Ordinances (Baptism & Lord’s Supper)

**Congregational involvement:**

In all elements of the worship service, the entire congregation plays a vital role. We should never fall into the trap of viewing the congregation as passive observers, instead, each member individually and the entire congregation corporately are actively engaged in every element of the worship service.

1. **In Song:** The congregation is the main instrument. Their singing together is the primary way which God is glorified, the body is edified, and the lost hear the Gospel through song. Much energy should be made to encourage the congregation to see themselves as the main instrument and to enable them to sing out loudly and boldly together.
2. **In Preaching:** The congregation is actively hearing God’s living word and being transformed by it. There is an onus on every believer to listen and apply the word to their own lives.
3. **In Prayer:** The congregation actively lifts their prayers up to the Lord whenever they pray together. Although a particular prayer may be spoken and led by an individual, that individual is speaking corporately on behalf of the congregation and the congregation is affirming what the speaker is offering up to the Lord.
4. **In Scripture Reading:** The congregation is actively listening to God’s Word being read and is being transformed by it.
5. **In the Ordinances:** The congregation participates in the ordinances together. In baptism, the congregation affirms, welcomes, and encourages. In the Lord’s Supper, the congregation remembers their corporate identity together and reaffirms their fellowship to one-another.

**What Corporate Worship is Not**

Confusion on what corporate worship is abounds in the modern church. It is good to define some of these misconceptions to bring clarity.

**Corporate Worship is not…**

**A Produced Emotional Experience:**

There can be a temptation to make the focus of corporate worship an emotional experience rather than a response to God. To be clear, corporate worship **will** bring about emotion that flows from the heart of a believer. But corporate worship does not exist to this end. Instead, emotion is a natural response from those who see God and his gospel work rightly.

**A Show/Performance that Entertains:**

We do not build the structure or content of corporate worship to entertain or produce excitement. If we do so, we are worshipping man, not God.

**Therapy:**

Corporate worship is not designed to ease your anxieties or make you feel good about yourself. Although corporate worship does indeed transform us and teach us who we are because of and in Christ, this is not its’ primary end.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, worship is a comprehensive and collective response to the revelation and actions of God in the life of believers. Rooted in the acknowledgment of who God is and what He has done, worship extends beyond specific activities, permeating every aspect of life as a continuous, thankful response to God. Corporate worship is done by the local church and serves the crucial purposes of exalting God, edifying the body, and evangelizing the lost. The "how" of corporate worship involves intentional crafting of liturgy, characterized by a shepherd's heart, and shaped by the Gospel.

1. Romans 12:1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Romans 5:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Colossians 3:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Colossians 3:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Colossians 3:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eph 3:7-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mike Cosper, Rhythms of Grace: How the Church’s Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bryan Chapell, Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 18–19. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bryan Chapell, 100. This is a summary of what Chapell calls “Liturgies of the Word,” which explains the omission of the Lord’s Supper, though I would suggest that the Supper and the notion of enjoying fellowship with God and one another could be included in number seven. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)