

Thoughts on Worship: *Theology, Practice and Grace*

By Mike Sciarra

We trust God for theologically sound lyrics that the widest range of people can sing passionately; to have a style, rhythm and sound that adds to rather than distracts from worship; worship music that resonates with people and engages them to focus wholeheartedly on God.

Believers should desire to be worshipping God with all their life because of how great He is. John Piper said that "worship is a feast of the glorious perfections of God in Christ" (Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*, p. 54). When we obey God's instructions to "delight yourself in the Lord" (Ps. 37:4) we worship. When we do not, we slide into the seat reserved for God alone and become the centerpiece, the focal point of a warped presentation. Worship is for God's pleasure and His people's growth in Christ likeness. With regard to corporate worship we must consider *how much is Biblically-based, how much is culturally-shaped and how much is preference-driven*.

Someone has said "Worship is for God; worship style is for the worshippers". That highlights the idea that God is most concerned that we worship Him and the heart is the primary issue. How it looks and sounds is secondary (and should be but is not always reflective of the heart of the worshippers; for example, someone may think something is not worshipful but the one leading is deeply worshipping, it just doesn't engage the other participants in the same way or on the same level), and will be at the discretion of the particular worshippers. For example, worship expressions look and sound different in different cultures and even within sub-cultures of cultures. In all settings God is most concerned with the heart of the worshippers, whom He desires to worship Him "In spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

Worship is an issue of the heart and the question that needs to be answered, is 'how do we come to God with a heart of worship?' Can we just turn worship on and off when we want to or is it part of our daily lives? Our worship at church is just a small part of our worship to God expressed in a corporate time of believers who have gathered for the purpose of worshipping and exalting God. In order for that worship to be heartfelt and genuine, it begins before we even walk through the front door of the church. Are we prayed up, focused, anticipating that we will have an encounter with God that reflects a life changed by and for Him? Or are we still caught up in conversations; or what we are going to do after church; or a negative, critical spirit or just absorbed in our own world?

How do we get there? **First**, the team leading worship needs to have hearts ready for worship. Their role in leading worship is to worship and invite us to join in. Therefore they need to communicate and invite an atmosphere of worship. Those leading must make it about God and not themselves. **Second**, prayer is vital to preparation. It is coming into the presence of a holy, righteous and just God who has showered and continues to shower His grace and mercy on us. Our relationship is special and if we are going to worship Him, we need to connect with Him. **Third**, we need to recognize that Jesus has truly changed us and He continues to do so. Think of the countless stories in the Bible of

people who had encountered Christ: the woman at the well, the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, the healed lepers, etc. They had an encounter with Christ that changed their life and they worshipped Him and gave Him thanks, glory and honor. We are in the same position, as sinners turned saints (holy and righteous in God's sight by the blood of Christ), as children dearly loved by our heavenly Father, we should come to Him with an attitude of worship, not just enduring music before the sermon or singing because it is a church thing. What child is not happy to see their Father when he comes home from work? Don't they run to him with arms raised, smile on their face because daddy's home? Shouldn't we do the same before our God and Father who sacrificed His Son so that we can run to Him? **Fourth**, as God's people gather to exalt Him they get a glimpse of His awesome glory and are transformed. We also get a glimpse of what it will be like in heaven to praise God and worship Him with our singing. Worship in song, in the reading and proclamation of His Word is the closest to heaven we can get here on earth. How are we responding to that? It's like a dress rehearsal for heaven. **Finally**, corporate worship (all elements of a service) needs to be God-centered; therefore we need to bring elements in that will help us to focus on God. Scripture, prayer, silence, etc. those things that lead us to focus on Him, as His Spirit leads and directs us.

With these things in mind here are some basic elements of worship theology we must hold to at Grace:

- 1. Worship is to be God-centered.** The God of the Bible is to be the focus. Is. 42:8 "I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another". Ps. 42:1-2 "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."
- 2. Worshipping God is an end in and of itself, not a means to getting something else.** There are many benefits that believers enjoy as a result of a life and corporate experience that is God-centered, but we do not worship primarily to get but to give to God. He blesses us as a result.
- 3. God's people benefit from worship in terms of growth as we respond to God's greatness.** Ps. 37:4 "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart".
- 4. The gospel changes us from the inside out and as we experience intimacy and joy in God we desire to worship Him.** As Christians become more like Christ, our desire to give honor and adoration to God will always increase.
- 5. When God's people gather to exalt Him they get a glimpse of His awesome glory and are transformed.**
- 6. Our interactions with the written Word of God lead us to worship, both individually and corporately.** God's Word is to have a primary place among His people: "Until I come give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and to teaching" 1 Timothy 4:13

7. In God-honoring, Christ-centered worship gatherings that are built solidly on the truth of God's Word, God's people are strengthened to do the will of God.

With these things in mind, some basic thoughts on worship practice at Grace:

1. Worship is for God; worship style is a matter of preference. Therefore we will seek to give appropriate worship to God, while taking into consideration the varying preferences that exist within our body, giving most of our attention to what resonates with the majority of the congregation while seeking to engage all in God-honoring worship and singing. We will continue to seek to improve our worship times, and move forward in a balanced manner, with a mix of fast and slow, loud and soft, old and new, joyful and meditative; understanding that not everyone will be happy with the music/sound at all times. We will live in the present, respecting the past and looking to the future.

2. We want deep, passionate, enthusiastic, reverent, God-centered worship that includes Biblically-solid contemporary songs and traditional hymns freshly played and/or arranged, led by people who are in love with Jesus and filled with God's Spirit, who freely express their love and devotion to God and invite others to do the same. Therefore we will remain true to our vision and goals and not allow others to control the process by emotional appeals or by claiming that 'this is the way we have always done it'. We will seek to grow and progress as a church. We will not be afraid to lovingly, graciously and gently explain these things to those who have differing opinions.

3. We want to be worshippers who engage wholeheartedly and unreservedly in worshipping God no matter who is leading and what is being played. Therefore we will teach what it means to worship God as well as seek excellence musically and in our leadership of worship services. We will avoid divisive arguments and lovingly correct those who operate with a negative or critical spirit in these matters. We will seek to connect with the majority of the people the majority of the time. We can have 'excellent' worship in terms of preparation, musical ability and proficiency and still not connect. We can be technically sound and spiritually and relationally lacking. We want all elements to be connecting.

4. We want to worship as a way of life, as an outflow of the life of Christ in us. Hebrews 13:15 "Through Him (Jesus) then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name".

5. We need to reach the people God has sent and is sending to us with appropriate, God-centered, Biblically-faithful and accurate, culturally relevant worship times¹.

¹By "culturally relevant worship times" we mean having theologically sound, Christ-centered lyrics that the widest range of people can sing passionately; a style, rhythm and sound that connects with people and adds to rather than distracts from worship; music that resonates with the majority of the people and engages them to focus wholeheartedly on God. Music that is in sync with the majority of current Christian music.

- Therefore we will seek to learn and grow and not get stuck in ways of doing things or be pulled into ways of doing things that are not God-centered, Biblically-faithful and accurate and currently relevant.
 - Therefore we will seek out new songs and new styles of worship that effectively relate to present generations; seeking appropriate balance.
 - We will not cater to only one segment of the church body in terms of style, sound and song selection, but will be willing to yield to change and grow in a Biblically-faithful, accurate and God-centered context.
 - We will not make unfair judgment calls on the preferences of others in the body (old or young, traditional or contemporary) but will seek to understand and appreciate the diversity God has put in our assembly.
- 6. Because the Bible shows the pattern for the faith being passed on from generation to generation (i.e. from parent to child, and so on), we will encourage all ages to worship together, including the oldest among us as well as parents bringing their children to worship with them (Deut. 6:4-9; Ps. 78:1-8; Ps. 127:1-5; Neh. 8:1-8; 2 Chron. 20:13).**
- Many GCO regulars and new people say they want the music to change and become more current. It is possible to capture the age range at GCO in our music and not lose people with it.
 - Therefore, we want to have all ages together for worship (children, youth and adults) and will encourage and welcome all ages into worship services, from the youngest to the oldest.
 - Therefore, we will in our worship services consistently seek to engage all generations (for example, we remain committed to not having a “traditional” and a “contemporary” service). One of the beautiful things about Grace is our "multi-generational" approach.
- 7. We will lead the way humbly and boldly in the direction God leads us.**
We expect worshippers to come with worshipful hearts *and* we will do our part by offering music and singing that resonates with people and does not distract; engaging people to wholeheartedly focus on God and praise Him.

Conclusion

The privilege God gives us to gather together weekly in worship cannot be underestimated. It is an awesome gift from God to have the ability to offer adoration and praise to Him as a gathered group of people. In our gatherings there will be both believers and unbelievers. We will call believers to worship, trust and obedience to God. We will call them to yield to the Lordship of Christ and aim for the glory of God. We will call unbelievers to faith and repentance. We will do much to make them feel welcome relationally but little to make them feel comfortable spiritually, as we want them to recognize their need of a Savior and come to faith in Christ, bowing before Almighty God. We will strive to trust God and to the best of our ability give Him appropriate praise, knowing that due to our fallen nature much of our effort will fall short of His glorious ideal, but trusting God’s work of sanctification in our lives we look to Him to lead us in ways that are honoring to Him.