

Philosophy of Worship at Westminster Presbyterian Church (PCA), Johnson City

INTRODUCTION

J. I. Packer accurately states that our “theology” - what we know about God - should impact our “doxology” - our worship of God. In other words, our rich theology should drive us towards deeper worship, not further away from it. Therefore, worship should be:

The gathering of God’s people to meet with him together, to glorify and enjoy him for who he is, and to remember and celebrate what he has done for us.

In other words, “a service of public worship is not merely a gathering of God’s children with each other, but before all else, a meeting of the triune God with his chosen people.”¹ In worship, God graciously calls us into his presence to hear him speak to us through his Word and Spirit. Also in worship, God transforms us by his Spirit to be more like Jesus as we respond to him in faith and obedience.

We gather in worship, then, to glorify and enjoy God for who he is: infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth – the very definition of everything beautiful, good, and praiseworthy. Even if he had done nothing for us, he would still deserve our worship. How much more, then, do we worship when we think of all he has done for us! God is worthy of great honor, glory, and thanks for the salvation he has so graciously accomplished for us through Christ and applied to us by the Holy Spirit.

Each Sunday, it is our vision for Westminster to truly meet with God together, glorifying and enjoying him for who he is, and remembering and celebrating what he has done for us. Our attention is meant to be upon God’s Word and our adoration, praise, and thanksgiving is directed to our Triune God. This is the vertical dimension of our worship. There is also a horizontal dimension. Your presence in worship is not just for the sake of your own soul but for the benefit of others. We join our voices together in singing and in reciting our Affirmation of Faith as a corporate declaration of what we believe and an encouragement to those worshipping with us.

When we say “worship”, let’s be clear about what we mean. Our worship each Sunday is not just the songs we sing. The worship service begins with the Call to Worship and concludes with our singing of the doxology. Each part of the service receives its direction from God’s Word. Therefore, the pastors are our worship leaders, even as our Choir and Music Director and the musicians lead and direct our music. Our hope is that you will come to worship with a mind and heart that is prepared. This preparation can take place on Saturday evening or Sunday morning as you pray and ask God to make you ready to come into His presence, to offer yourself to Him in praise and worship, to receive the nourishment of His Word and Sacrament, and then to go and obey all that you have heard.

OUR WORSHIP COMMITMENTS

¹ PCA BCO 47-2. <http://www.pcaac.org/bco/>

Our worship service finds its direction from the Scriptures. We seek to include in our service only that which is commanded in God's Word. Also, the PCA Book of Church Order contains a Directory for Worship that we believe is a helpful tool and an accurate reflection of the teaching of Scripture. Our rich Reformed theology directly impacts how we worship together on Sundays. Because of this, we prioritize content, form and style – in that order. Let us briefly explain what we mean by these commitments.

1. Content: We approach worship by thinking first and foremost about substance: the content of what we sing, pray, read and speak. Simply put, worship - its substance - is formative and shapes us. We don't need the thoughts and opinions of men or women. We need God's living and active Word (Heb. 4:12). Thus, we seek to align and saturate the entire worship service with Scripture. Specifically, we seek to be Trinitarian (worship is enabled by and owed to Father, Son, and Spirit – Mark 12:33) and Christ-Centered (Jesus is the mediator who brings us to God – Heb. 4:14-15, 9:15).

Therefore, content is the central priority that forms the foundation of our worship philosophy, vision, and priorities. We are committed to God-Honoring, Christ-Glorifying, and Spirit-Saturated content in our worship. Our songs each Sunday are chosen by the pastoral staff. The goal is to choose songs that support the message of the sermon and enhance its application.

The pulpit is the central item located in the sanctuary. Just as our eye is drawn to it upon entering the sanctuary, so too should our minds and hearts be drawn to the message that will be delivered from it. The Reformation returned the preached Word of God to its proper place of importance. All elements of worship are important, but they all find their instruction from God's Word and are all meant to enhance the preaching of the Word.

At Westminster we believe in what is called the Regulative Principle of Worship.

“Put simply, the regulative principle of worship states that the corporate worship of God is to be founded upon specific directions of Scripture. On the surface, it is difficult to see why anyone who values the authority of Scripture would find such a principle objectionable. Is not the whole of life itself to be lived according to the rule of Scripture? This is a principle dear to the hearts of all who call themselves biblical Christians. All of life is to be regulated by Scripture, whether by express commandment or prohibition or by general principle. There is therefore, in one sense, a regulative principle for all of life. In everything we do, and in some form or another, we are to be obedient to Scripture.”
-Derek Thomas

2. Form: We have a set order or liturgy that we work through each week, which is designed to reinforce our content. Our liturgy rehearses the gospel story (Rom. 8:15, 23, 29-30; Eph. 1:5) through each step of our worship service and we seek to select songs that speak to either those steps of the service or to the overall theme of the service.

Worship at Westminster starts with a call to worship and a prayer of invocation. God is the one who invites us into worship. He, alone, deserves and desires our praise, so we ask him to empower us to worship and by His Spirit to receive the nourishment of His Word, so that the service will bring glory to him and good to us. We then move on to a hymn of adoration, recognizing that God is intrinsically worthy of praise (Psalm 100).

Our desire is that the songs we sing will fit well with the theme or tone of the sermon that morning. We seek songs that are theologically accurate and well as easily “singable” by the congregation.

We then move into a time of confession and assurance of pardon; that is, pardoning grace. Having seen God and his greatness, we recognize our own sin – both corporate and personal – and are reminded of the gospel’s promise of forgiveness and the impact it has on us (1 John 1:9). God’s voice has authority and priority in our worship, and we listen to him so that by the Holy Spirit his truth may change us (Nehemiah 8:1-8).

After singing a song together, we lift our voices together and affirm what we believe about our Triune God, salvation, faith, or some aspect of Reformed theology. This is our Affirmation of Faith. It is what we believe as God’s people and Lord willing it also reflects the individual’s conviction and hope.

Next, we move into the pastoral prayer, where we recognize that the sovereign God who saves us also cares about the details of our lives, so we can take our concerns to him (Phil. 4:6).

We believe in what is called expository preaching. This means that the content of the sermon arises out of the text and the application is the necessary consequence to our lives as a result of what is found in the text. This is why we preach through books of the Bible. We believe this method provides accountability for the pastor (he cannot skip topics he does not like) and makes for well-rounded church members (they are exposed to a wide variety of topics related to God and the Christian life... not just the ones they like to talk about!). Topical sermons have their place and benefit but the normal way of preaching at Westminster is expositional.

We follow the preached word, on the first Sunday of the month, with the Lord’s Supper, which reminds us that because of Christ, we have fellowship with God. In the elements of the Lord’s Supper and in partaking with the body of Christ, our faith is strengthened, and our hope is renewed as we “taste and see” how good our God is (Psalm 34:8; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). At the Table, we are renewed in our faith and nourished by God’s grace.

Finally, we have the Benediction and the singing of the Doxology. We depart from the Sanctuary with a blessing from the Lord and then we join our voices together to thank and praise Him for the season of worship we have just enjoyed together. These pieces remind us that we do not exist for ourselves. We are then dismissed to take what we have received and learned, in order to be salt and light to the world.

We strive to ensure that step of our service, each section of our liturgy, is aligned with Scripture and reinforces the content of gospel truth, placing Christ at the center of our worship. Thus, we seek to select songs, as best we can, whose rich content supports the form and structure of our service.

3. Style. After content and form comes style. While content and form are far more important, unfortunately style (particularly in music) is the area that often causes debate

and disagreement within so many churches and indeed our own. Every church has a certain worship or music “style.” Ours is more formal and traditional. We describe our style of congregational music as “blended.” Two further terms explain what we mean by blended worship style.

A. Variety. We want to sing both the great hymns of our heritage and the best contemporary songs of the present; not only one or the other. We want to connect ourselves to the Church’s rich hymns of the past, while also moving into the future with fresh, Christ-centered music. In our worship we want to encourage one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs as we sing to the Lord with all our heart (Eph. 5:19). We want to praise the Lord with all our voices, young and old (Ps. 148:12-13), and with a variety of instruments (Ps. 150). Therefore, we seek a variety of songs, for a variety of ages, with a variety of instruments to accompany style.

B. Unity. We want to artistically arrange for a variety of instruments to play together in worship. We want our people to sing with united voices across generations and transcending personal style preferences in music, giving a beautiful illustration of and a testimony to our unity in Christ and our love and respect for one another as many members of one body (1 Cor. 12-13).

Thus, for us at Westminster, blended worship means both a diversity in songs, ages, and instruments and unity of instruments, voices, and hearts. This type of blended worship is our aim! Certainly there is more to say about music in worship such as the singability and memorability of songs. We care deeply about the congregation being able to actually sing what is put before them in worship.

OUR WORSHIP PRIORITIES

Along with these commitments in worship that guide our practice are these priorities that influence our thinking when it comes to Sunday morning worship.

1. Relationship with God (not just intellectual agreement)

Corporate worship, at its core, is a meeting between God and his covenant people. Therefore, we want to enter into every part of worship in light of God’s presence with us. If Jesus were to return and stand in the middle of our sanctuary one Sunday, it shouldn’t make a difference to our praise. Why? Because he is already in our midst! God is with us in worship not only by virtue of his divine omnipresence, but much more intimately, as our faithful covenant Savior. Engagement in worship is part of our personal relationship with the God of heaven and earth! This focus on our relationship with God should change how we think about worship.

2. Participation (not performance)

Worship is not a passive, consumer experience. It is a dialogue between God and his people. In worship, God speaks to us by his word and Spirit, and we respond back to him in a number of ways. These responses include various forms of prayers, singing, silence, participation in sacraments, giving of tithes and offerings, confessions of faith, and vows. The entire service of worship can be viewed as a holy conversation back and

forth between God and his people. We want our people to be active participants in this holy dialogue.

3. Conviction (not emotionalism)

Grace-filled worship involves authentic participation and genuine emotion as we respond to God's Word and Spirit. When we are singing songs about the joy of the gospel, we want our hearts to feel that joy! Likewise, when we sing about the brokenness of our sin, we want to feel sorrow. This is not emotionalism, but rather conviction. The truth of the gospel ought to convict our hearts –which is a Biblical emotional response. We want to engage both the head and the heart and thus fully participate in worship.

4. Freedom (not fear)

Believers around the world worship the Lord in many different ways; when you have a relationship with God, you should feel free to respond in a way that is well with your soul. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Cor. 3:17). We want every person to know the freedom of worshiping God regardless of circumstances of joy or grief, ease or struggle, fear or confidence, lack or abundance. Whether you want to smile, laugh, cry, say "Amen," raise your hands, or bow your head, you should feel free to worship in a way that reflects where you are and what the Lord is doing in your heart.

5. Family (not division)

Within this community, there is much variety – variety in style, tradition, preference, age, personality, and experience. While one style may not be a personal favorite, each worshiper can value how it may facilitate participatory worship for other members of this family. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Where Satan is, there is division; division is his calling card. We are a family, and we strive to love each other as such! On one Sunday, we may sing all of your favorite songs, while on the next, the songs chosen don't make your top 100 list! Keep in mind that the couple sitting behind you may find the songs on the second Sunday to be uplifting and hold a special place in their hearts. And one of those songs reminds the widow seated two rows in front of you of her late husband and she is comforted by singing it. We come to worship for the sake of glorifying God and for the sake of our church family and all of its members.

As we plan our Sunday services, these priorities laid on the foundation of our commitments, drive the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, and each and every component of the service. We come together to be in the presence of God and to worship him in Spirit and in truth.

In Christ,

The Westminster Session