

A Biblical Methodology of Congregational Worship

by Scott Aniol

“What worship style do you use?” “Do you prefer traditional or contemporary worship?” “Is worship for us or for God?” These questions and many more like them are prevalent in evangelical circles. Professing believers of various nationalities, denominations, and associations have begun asking the question, “What is worship?”

Establishing a Methodology of Congregational Worship

For a Christian, every decision should have a scriptural, **theological basis** as its foundation. The Word of God is the only certain, objective source of criteria for decision-making. A theology of a topic is what the Bible teaches about that topic. This may be explicit instructions or implicit principles.

From that theology must flow a believer's **philosophy**. Based on the scriptural principles that have been gathered concerning a topic, the believer must develop a philosophy. A philosophy is the "why" and the "how" of the topic.

Finally, the believer can formulate a **methodology** based on that philosophy. This is the "what" of the topic--the nitty-gritty decisions and choices that need to be made every day. Unfortunately, many Christians skip the first two steps when making decisions, or their methodology is completely inconsistent with their professed theology and philosophy. In reality, the inconsistent methodology is simply an indication that they don't really believe their theology and philosophy. A person's methodology is a foolproof indicator of a person's theology.

A Theology of Congregational Worship

What Is Worship?

All of the controversy over what worship really is has driven believers to ask this very important question—What is worship? In reality, worship is why we exist. It is therefore very important that we develop a sound, biblical definition of what it means to worship. In order to do so, we must go to the Scriptures. Any definition that we contrive is insufficient unless it finds its basis in the Word of God.

Throughout Scripture two elements predominantly characterize worship—a presentation of truth and a response to that truth. A brief survey of some passages with demonstrate this point:

Nehemiah 8.1-6

"So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground."

Matthew 28.9

"Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him."

In each case (and there are many more), worship involves a response (either external or internal) to a presentation of truth about God. This is the essence of true, biblical worship—response to truth. Jesus summarized this fact when he said,

John 4.24

"God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit [internal response] and in truth."

True worship, therefore, is not confined to Sunday morning. All of life should be worship. Every act, thought, and attitude of a Christian should be a response to truth about God. This is expressed throughout the New Testament:

Romans 12.1

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

Therefore, worship can be defined as follows:

Worship is a biblical response to God
resulting from an understanding
of biblical truth about God.

What is Congregational Worship?

There is much discussion by Christians about different "worship styles" and whether or not they please the Lord. Terms such as "conservative," "traditional," "contemporary," or "blended" are used to describe differing philosophies of worship style. There are, however, three definite biblical worship "styles" taught in Scripture.

Lifestyle Worship

The first "style" of worship is what we have just seen from Scripture — All of life should be worship.

Private Worship

A more narrowed "style" of worship is private worship. This is when a believer spends dedicated personal time with the Lord in His Word and in prayer. As a believer studies the Word of God, the Holy Spirit will illumine him as to the significance of that Scripture to his life, and he should respond accordingly.

Congregational Worship

The third "style" of worship is congregational worship. This is the gathering of the people of God in order to corporately worship Him as His people. This form of worship is clearly commanded and exemplified in Scripture:

Psalm 149.1

"Praise ye the LORD. Sing unto the LORD a new song, and his praise in the congregation of saints."

Congregational worship was also exemplified in the early church (Acts 2.42-47; 13.1-3). It is clear both from Old Testament command and from New Testament example that God desires believers to lift His praises together. He wants His children to gather for the purpose of honoring Him. This worship is still individual, heart-felt response toward God, but it is done publicly in the presence of other believers. This brings God even more glory than if it were done privately. C. H. Spurgeon said, "Personal praise is sweet unto God, but congregational praise has a multiplicity of sweetnesses in it."

It is also important to recognize the worship language that Paul uses to describe the New Testament Church:

1 Corinthians 3.16-17

"Don't you know that you yourselves [as a congregation] are God's temple [naos, same word used for the Holy Place in the Temple] and that God's Spirit lives in you [plural]? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you [plural] are that temple."

1 Peter 2.5

"You [plural pronoun] also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house [oikos, "dwelling"] to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Therefore, congregational worship could be defined as follows:

Congregational worship is a unified
chorus of biblical responses toward God
expressed publicly to God resulting
from an understanding of biblical
truth about God.

A Philosophy of Congregational Worship

From this theology, we can determine a biblical philosophy of congregational worship. First, congregational worship must be **God-oriented**. Because congregational worship is specifically designed to be a response to God because of biblical truth about Him, God must be the center of the the service. Because the Bible is our only objective source of truth about God, Scriptural truth about God should be the content of congregational worship. Because worship is intended to be a response to God, congregational worship should be directed to God.

Second, congregational worship must be **doctrine-oriented**. Because believers can respond only when they have understood biblical truth, congregational worship should be filled with doctrinal truth. Because worship requires understanding doctrine and

understanding requires work, believers should not shy away from elements in the service that have deep, thought-provoking content.

Third, congregational worship must be **affection-oriented**. Service elements that excite the passions are not acceptable for congregational worship. "Passions" are emotions that are immediately gratifying, are shallow, and result from emotionalism that bypasses the intellect. Since understanding of truth is bypassed, this kind of emotionalism is not acceptable for congregational worship. Service elements that develop God-honoring affections should be used for congregational worship. "Affections" are emotions that result from volitional acknowledgment of objective truth. They take work to develop and are more lasting and pleasing to the Lord. Affections toward God are the essence of true worship.

Fourth, congregational worship must be **congregation-oriented**. Because the purpose of congregational worship is that believers join together as the body of Christ to express a unified response to God, service elements that are very individualistic or personal do not have a place in congregational worship. Music used in congregational worship should be limited to songs that express objective truth that applies to all Christians.

A Methodology of Congregational Worship

We have seen that true worship has two parts—a presentation of truth and response to that truth. Both of these must be present in a worship service for worship to take place. Therefore, every element in the service will facilitate one or both of these.

Preparation for Worship

5 minutes before our morning worship service, we ask that the congregation gather in the auditorium and quietly prepare themselves for worship. As reverent music plays, Christians are able to clear their minds of the cares of the week and truly prepare to worship the Lord. During this time the choir and orchestra are praying that the Lord will be pleased with the service. It may also be helpful for you family to spend a period of time on Saturday evening to prepare for the day to follow. Develop in your children an appreciation and expectant anticipation of worship. Encourage them to view congregational worship as the highest priority of the week.

The Congregation as Participants

Every member of the congregation is responsible to worship the Lord during a worship service. A "spectator" mentality of people in the pews is easy to develop but clearly anti-biblical. You should be engaged in worship at all times during the service. If there is a lag between "events," use that time for prayer and response to the Lord.

Congregational singing is one of the most important aspects to a worship service. It is the one event where every member of the congregation can verbally worship the Lord together. Make good use of this time to understand the biblical truth expressed in the hymns and respond to the Lord through the music.

Worship Leaders

The purpose of the music director, orchestra, choir, and other musicians is to lead in the worship of God. Their purpose is not to entertain or perform. Their purpose is to lead the rest of the congregation in worship. The congregation should participate with the worship leaders.

During an instrumental number, meditate on the words of the music and notice how the musical arrangement strengthens the message of the text. If you don't know the words, open your hymn book and meditate on the text.

During vocal numbers, strive to worship along with the group or soloist by understanding truth and responding with them. The music will aid in the learning of truth and the expression of response.

If the song teaches primarily doctrine, strive to understand its implications and respond to the Lord accordingly. If it primarily expresses a response, strive to join with the musicians in your heart.

Word from God

View preaching as the primary time when God speaks during the service. This is the time when believers are confronted with clear, biblical truth from God. Every attempt should be made to be sensitive to conviction from the Lord. Worship occurs only when you acknowledge truth and respond with change, affection, or consecration to God.

Does Order Matter?

Because worship is response to truth, we order our services to reflect this. There is no biblically ordained order to a worship service. But too many churches mindlessly order their services out of tradition. We must think through our order; God deserves this.

Prayer of Confession and Invocation

The Lord will not be pleased with our worship if we are harboring sin in our hearts. Therefore it is necessary to begin a service with a time of confession. Use this time to clear your life of unconfessed sin. We also ask the Lord to meet with us and be pleased with our worship. We ask Him to convict us of sin and increase our love and devotion for Him.

Call to Worship

Our worship begins with a hymn, scripture passage, or other musical selection that calls believers to worship. Songs that specifically call Christians to praise and worship the Lord are chosen for this function.

Affirmation of Truth

Since worship cannot occur until believers have understood and acknowledged biblical truth, the next section of the service must contain a presentation and affirmation of biblical truth. This can take the form of a congregational hymn, doctrinal reading, or other doctrinal musical selection. Truth is presented and affirmed also through the

reading of Scripture and through the preaching. Believers should strive to understand and accept the truth and then respond appropriately.

Expression of Response

After truth has been presented and acknowledged, response to truth must take place in order for worship to occur. Songs of praise and adoration make this possible. Acts of giving and consecration are also appropriate responses to the Lord.

What music should be chosen?

Only music that fits our philosophy of congregational worship should be chosen. We chose only music that is primarily objective in content, Godward as opposed to man-centered, and that which applies to all believers as a whole. Sentimental, individualistic music, no matter how true, is not chosen for congregational worship.

We strive to chose the best hymns, both in their texts and musical styles. We chose music that fits a particular function within the service and that will maintain a mood of reverence and solemnity before the Lord.

Conclusion

Methodologies are not inspired; they are derived from biblical theology and philosophy. It is our prayer at First Baptist that our methodology be driven by our theology. Personal preference or taste is not the primary criterion. Our Methodology of Congregational Worship comes from our understanding the Word of God