In Spirit and In Truth

To glorify God and enjoy Him in Worship

In Spirit and in Truth

What Shapes the way we Worship

Jesus said, 'God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth' (Jn 4.24). While many Christians tie themselves up in knots over what they think worship is all about, we would do well to stop and reflect on what God has to say – not least because Jesus prefaces this statement with the words, '…for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.'

The Bible teaches that all of life is worship. This comes out in what Paul says as he applies the gospel to Christians: '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' (Ro 12.1). All that we are and all that we do as Christians – individually and together – must be 'for the praise of his glory' (Eph 1.12). But this is not all the Bible has to say about worship. It also speaks of special times when God's people gather together to praise him as we hear his word and respond to him in worship. These times are nothing less than our being caught up in Christ to taste the joys of heaven in advance and pour out our hearts in praise and adoration to God in all his triune glory (He 12.22-24). In light of this we can appreciate why Eugene Peterson has said, 'The four most important words we can ever hear in any given week are: "Let us worship God!"' Public worship is the high point of Christian experience.

What follows in these pages is an attempt to briefly summarize what is involved in public worship in a way that reflects the views and practice of Reformed Churches through the ages to help us understand more fully what we do and why when we come to meet with God. In the words of

David, it is that we might truly, 'Shout with joy to the Lord', 'Sing the glory of his name' and 'Make his praise glorious' (Ps 66.1-2).

The Spirit and Context of Worship

We cannot properly understand worship without thinking about its context. God has provided that context setting apart one day in which he is to be its special focus. From the very beginning in creation, we are told that as God himself rested when his work of creation was complete, so he set one day in seven apart for his creation to rest (Ge 2.1-3). This was not merely the rest of stopping work; but the rich rest found through savouring the 'very good' work of his hands and also to allow his creation – and humanity especially – to enjoy communion with our Creator.

The principle of this rest was enshrined in the Fourth Commandment in relation to Israel's Sabbath and then elevated in the New Testament to the Sabbath rest of the First Day of the week – the 'Lord's Day' – as the celebration of God's New Creation, inaugurated by Christ's resurrection. God's special day of rest finds its deepest fulfilment in its being the day for public worship. There is no better way to make the most of that day than by beginning it and ending it as the family of God gathering to praise his name.

When God's people do gather, it is not to simply worship in a way that pleases them. Our main aim should be to worship God in the way that pleases him. Worship must be shaped and moulded by what he has said in his word. Again, this comes out in the Ten Commandments. The first commandment tells us whom we are to worship, and the second how we are to worship. Whatever we include in worship must have clear warrant from the Bible and be

neither mere tradition nor the latest fad or fashion in the church.

Jesus makes it very clear that the spirit in which we worship is also of huge importance. As quoted already, we are to worship God 'in spirit and in truth' – that is, with heart and mind engaged and aligned with what God has revealed. Isaiah's warning about those who worship God with their lips, but with hearts far from him (Isa 29.13) is a challenge to every generation.

This leads into a second crucial element in the way we worship God: we come to him with 'reverence and awe' (He 12.28). Even though we have the joy of intimate communion with God; that does not mean that we should come to him with a careless or casual attitude.

The best way to keep these aspects of worship to the forefront of our minds as we gather for a service is that it should begin with a call to worship. In these words, God himself invites us through his Son and by his Spirit to come to him and offer him our praise. To hear his voice calling us to come to him fills us with a sense of awe and fires us in heartfelt adoration.

The Component Parts of Worship

There are seven main elements in worship – each of them contributing in its own particular way to making our praise pleasing in God's sight and a blessing to us as we offer it.

The first is God's Word. The Bible is crucial to worship because it is God's way of speaking to us clearly. Through it we discover who he is, what he is like and what he wills. As

we listen to him speaking, we worship responsively to all he has revealed. Supremely it is in God's word that we come face to face with Jesus who is the living Word in human flesh. So, in worship, we hear the Bible read, preached, prayed and sung – it shapes the praise we bring to God.

The second major component of worship is music and song. Just as the worship of heaven is filled with music, so our praise on earth is musical as well. We are to worship God using psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Col 3.16) – making the most of the inspired book of praise that we have in the Psalter as well as the best expressions of the hymns and songs composed by the church through the ages. Sung praise has the double effect of honouring God and instructing those who sing.

When we worship, we also pray. If the Bible is God's speaking to us, then prayer is the most obvious way by which we speak to him in response. Prayer should not just be holy rambling, but is best shaped by the patterns and examples we find in Scripture. Those who lead in public prayer pray with and for the congregation and so should use the language of 'we' and 'us' to include all present. The congregation as a whole can also join together in prayer in the words of the Family Prayer that Christ himself taught his disciples. Bible-shaped prayers involve adoration, confession, intercession and thanksgiving.

One element of worship that is often not appreciated as much as it ought to be is the importance of the sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Christ gave these holy rites to the church in part as a visible and tangible portrayal of the gospel; but more than that, as 'signs and seals of his covenant of grace'. That is, as guarantees of all God has promised in

salvation through his Son. There is a solemnity about the way the Bible speaks of baptism and communion that is bound up with the intimacy they provide in our fellowship with God.

The place of money in worship is also often misconstrued. Many people see the giving of tithes and offerings as a kind of church taxation; but that is not the case. Paul's instruction about giving is linked to 'the first day of the week' (1Co 16.1) – the day for worship. It was the means by which God's people could express in a tangible way their gratitude for all he provides for them. How much should we give? In the Old Testament a tenth was what was required; in the New Testament the principle is that we should give as we have been given: 'thoughtfully and generously' in response to Christ who is God's 'indescribable gift' to us (2Co 9.15).

It would be very easy to think of worship as being largely passive; but that would miss the point of all that has been said so far. To worship 'in spirit and in truth' means that we must be engaged and not switched off in worship. So, singing and praying are means by which we participate. But one little detail in the biblical pattern of worship is often overlooked: it is the people of God saying 'Amen!' to all that is going on. It is there in the Old Testament (Ps 106.48) and is there also in the New (Rev 19.4). It is a wonderful way of us as the family of God showing we are united in our praise and response to God.

God has the first word in worship and he also has the last, so the seventh and final major element of worship is the Benediction – God's words of blessing pronounced upon his people. He sends his people out into the world assuring them of his grace and favour.

Things that are Flexible in Worship

There are many things about worship that will vary from culture to culture and in its different expressions throughout history.

The Bible does not fix the times of services! Each congregation should decide on what is most suitable for most of his people. But when those times are agreed, everyone ought to make a God-honouring effort to respect those times. Arriving late for worship is not only distracting to other worshippers, it is disrespectful to God.

The issue of musical accompaniment in worship is often a matter of debate. The instruments used in worship that are mentioned in the Bible were instruments of Bible times – many of them no longer exist. On the other hand, the organ and piano, used by so many churches, are not mentioned at all in the Bible. There is no prescribed list of instruments that are appropriate for worship; but in light of the broader principles stated already, any instruments used should serve to accompany the singing and not become the focus of attention themselves. Indeed, there are times when unaccompanied singing can be the best means of expressing worship without distraction.

Some Areas where our Worship may seem Different

In 21st Century churches worship practice varies enormously and the norm (if there is a norm) tends to have quite a different flavour to what we do in Groomsport. Given that there are reasons behind our particular approach to worship in this church, it might be helpful to spell out what lies behind our practice in some of these areas.

There is a measure of formality in our services that may feel different to the more relaxed and casual approach of many other churches. Our belief is that since we are coming to the King of kings and Lord of lords in worship, then it is entirely appropriate that we do so in humility and with reverence before him.

This in turn affects the choice of what we sing. Alongside the Psalms as the core component of its sung praise, the church throughout its history has built up a rich heritage of hymns and spiritual songs that express the great truths of God and the gospel. They also reflect a richly diverse musical repertoire that encompasses the whole range of emotion bound up with the variety of truths and experiences found in those hymns. Each generation adds to that body of sung praise; but does so, not by ignoring what has come before, but by augmenting it. This means our sung worship ought to incorporate hymns that are shaped by biblical truth which are drawn from both ancient and modern traditions.

The main focus of our services is geared towards those who are Christians engaging with God, hearing his word and responding to him in praise. That does not mean that people who are not yet Christians are either unwelcome, or will find nothing in their search for salvation as they join with us. As Paul says to the Corinthians, the one thing that should stand out for everyone who attends public worship is that God is really present with his people (1Co 14.25).

When it comes to the sacraments and how they are administered in Groomsport, we follow the time-honoured principle in the church that those who lead communion and administer baptism must be ordained ministers. The

sacraments must always be accompanied by biblical explanation and application so that those who receive them clearly understand what they are and how God's people benefit from them.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul makes it clear that true worship always involves understanding. He says, 'I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will pray with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind' (1Co 14.15). This means the more we grow in our knowledge and love of God, the more we enter into true worship and give him the honour he deserves.

Our prayer as a church is that God would lead us into a deeper knowledge of himself and experience of his grace that we might 'make his praise glorious' in our lives and as we worship.