

# CCC on Purpose – We’re Here to Worship

## Introduction

A church family or fellowship can be a very comfortable place – a warm, calm, comforting, safe, convenient place to see family and friends. We may think of church as a place to experience God’s goodness and healing to prepare and steady us to face life’s issues and trials. “Church” is often synonymous with stability, tradition, correct doctrine, relationships, so much so that we may speak at times of our church “home.” For the most part this picture is good and true to the New Testament. The Lord said that He would found His church upon the rock of Peter’s confession of Him as Messiah. Paul called us to be steadfast and immovable and not blown this way and that by every wind of doctrine. A significant part of the church’s energy and activity ought to be dedicated to “building itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:16).

But is this all there is to it? Is church merely an end in itself or is there something more, some greater purpose that points beyond us? What are we supposed to be doing? Why should we do it? These, of course, are some of the most important questions that we can ask ourselves. If we have no clear and compelling answers to them, we can’t orient ourselves, we won’t know if we’re going up or down or making any progress at all, we’ll waste time and energy, and we’re likely to start pulling against one another in ways that cause conflict. If there are no clear and compelling answers to these questions we might as well hang it up and go do something else. On the other hand, if there are clear and compelling answers to these questions then we ought to recommit

ourselves to each other and to the task at hand. So what are we doing and why are we doing it?

First, it's essential to be clear on exactly who "we" are. We who attend CCC come from a tremendous variety of geographical, ethnic, spiritual backgrounds, family and marital situations, employment experiences, and so on. We do share some important things like our humanity and our sinfulness, but these are also things that we have in common with everyone else in Idaho Falls. What makes us like one another and at the same time distinguishes us from many other people in Idaho Falls is that **we are sinners who have come to know that God forgives us because Christ died in our place for our sins on the cross.** This experience of being forgiven by God is, in fact, the most overwhelming, miraculous experience that any sinner can have. The Bible uses some dramatic metaphors for this experience: being born again, being raised from the dead, and being recreated. This is the "bottom line," the single most important thing that unites us and gives us our identity at Christ Community Church.

Once we recognize this, answering the questions above becomes easier. What we are doing at CCC and why we are doing it flows directly out of our common experience of being forgiven by God. First, we who are forgiven instinctively respond with humble, joyful thanksgiving. We try to understand and appreciate what God has done for us and try to know Him better and please Him more. As we do, we wonder at His holiness, mercy, faithfulness, power, and glory. In short, **we worship the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ** and together we try to worship God more wholeheartedly and truly. In our CCC mission statement we simply say that we aim to present to Jesus Christ a community of worshipping disciples.

We sinners who have been forgiven by God also instinctively tell other sinners where they can find forgiveness. We truly have nothing better to talk about. Nothing else even comes close. We tell others that in Christ, God became man, died for our sins and rose again in victory over sin and death. We tell them that God will forgive them and give them eternal life, if they will place their trust in Jesus Christ. In short **we proclaim the gospel, the good news, of God's gift of forgiveness in Christ.** In our CCC mission statement we simply say that we proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord to our community and world.

**We are here to Worship our God.**  
**We are here to Proclaim the Good News.**

These are the higher purposes that allow us to orient ourselves in difficult or confusing times. They are our "mission." They call us out of ourselves, demand our best efforts and draw us forward into greater faith and obedience. Why do these things? I've touched on this above – we do these things because we have been forgiven by God and we are joyful and thankful. John summed this up very succinctly, "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). We cannot help but love the One who loved us so much that He gave His Son for us. Because we love Him, we worship Him, individually and corporately in our words and in our deeds. Because we love Him, we tell others about His love and forgiveness. Our motivation is not guilt or fear or pride. It is not to be a bigger church than the one down the street. It is not to help us feel good about ourselves. It is not because we want to impress the pastor or the elders or each other. It is because we know what it means to be loved and forgiven by God and to love Him in return. Our love for Him is far from perfect, but His great love for us compels

us to grow to “love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind” (Matthew 22:37).

Let’s not lose sight of these purposes, our mission. Let’s remind ourselves and each other often what we are doing and why we are doing it. In this paper we’ll explore what it means to worship. The topic of proclaiming the Good News is covered in a second paper entitled “CCC on Purpose . . . We’re Here to Proclaim the Good News.”

## **Worship: Responding to God’s Presence**

The English word “worship” means to ascribe worth to, to venerate, adore or devote oneself to an object one considers to have high or ultimate value. The concept of worship also includes a dependence on that which is worshipped. Worship is demonstrably a universal human activity. Wherever we find people, we find them worshipping, we find them consciously dependent upon something or someone other than and greater than themselves and ascribing worth to that thing or being. From the Bible, we understand that this is because God created man in His own image and put within man the knowledge of Himself (Genesis 1:26-27; Romans 1:19). We are also told in the Bible that, because of sin, man is fallen and man’s drive to worship is corrupt and distorted, so that fallen men worship things other than the Creator and they worship in ways that are actually repugnant to God. Because of sin it is necessary for God to reveal Himself so that people can worship the true God in the correct way. The Bible is the story of God revealing Himself in his way (Hebrews 1: 1-3). True worship, then, is simply the appropriate response to God’s revelation of Himself, the appropriate response to God’s presence. Christian worship is our response to God as He has

revealed Himself and made Himself present to us in Jesus Christ.

The idea that true worship is responding to God's presence has a very important implication - How we worship is to be determined by the One whom we worship. Our worship is good and true if it pleases God, if it conforms to His will and character. Whether it pleases us is secondary. Worship is not primarily self-expression; it is our response to God's self-revelation. In worship, our goal is not to "be ourselves" or to "be comfortable," but to move toward God and to become more pleasing to God. Paul captured this when he wrote, "And we, who with unveiled faces behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:17).

It is sobering to realize that sometimes our ideas of what constitutes "good" worship can themselves become idols. Sometimes, instead of trying to draw near to the God who has revealed Himself in Christ, we are hoping for a certain quality of experience, a certain tone in the music, a certain feeling in prayer, a certain mood in the sermon. Sometimes we long to recreate a wonderful feeling that we felt in a past worship experience. These things, however, are not God and are less than God. When we long for an experience, no matter how thrilling or sublime, rather than the God who has revealed Himself in Christ, we fall into idolatry. Worship is entering into God's presence and responding to Him.

In fact, if our worship "feels good" or "feels right" to us, this may be a sign that it is not right at all. If, by this we mean that our worship is routine and as comfortable as our favorite pair of shoes, we probably have got it wrong. Entering God's presence, even for forgiven sinners, is

never routine and is often not comfortable, although it may well be comforting. Consider how the following biblical characters responded to God's presence: Abraham (Genesis 15:12); Jacob (Genesis 28:16-17); Moses (Exodus 33:23; 34:6-9); the priests at the consecration of the temple (1 Kings 8:11); Job (42:1-6); Isaiah (6:4-5); Ezekiel (1:28); the disciples (Matthew 17:6; Mark 4:41); and John (Revelation 1:17). Entering God's presence in worship often makes us uncomfortable with ourselves, but it is often this discomfort that God uses to transform us.

## **All of Life Should Be Worship**

Another important implication of this definition of worship has to do with the "where" and "when" of worship. If worship is indeed an appropriate response to God's presence, the answer to the question "Where should we worship?" is simply "Wherever God is present – that is everywhere." Likewise, the answer to the question "When should we worship?" is simply "Whenever God is present – that is all the time." The Bible is very clear that God is present everywhere and at all times (Psalm 139:7-12; Psalm 90:1-2) and that He reveals Himself to us continually through the wonders of creation (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:20) and through our inner being (Romans 1:19, 2:14-15).

This view of worship, that it is responding to God's presence everywhere at all times, can't help but expand our worship and transform our perspective on life. Worship is much more important and all inclusive than we may have thought. It is much more than what goes on in church on Sunday morning. All our life, every thought, every affection, every decision, every action ought to be worship. All our life ought to be lived out in

the presence of God. Some have termed this “Practicing the presence of God.” The point here is not merely that we can worship God anywhere and anytime (a wonderful possibility), but that we should worship God wherever we are and at all times. Remember – it is not that we somehow make God present by consciously thinking about Him. Absolutely not! He is present whether or not we consciously recognize His presence. Can you imagine being the same room as the President of the United States and ignoring him? How much more offensive and inappropriate it is for us to ignore God’s presence. For us life should be worship and worship should be life.

This expansive, all inclusive view of worship is certainly embodied in the first great commandment. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Matthew 12:30). It’s also suggested in Jesus’ answer to the woman at the well “True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23). We can also see it in Paul teachings “If we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 13:8); “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31); “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Simple, isn’t it? Yes, simple, but not easy, at least for us sinners in a fallen world.

But aren’t there places and times in which God makes His presence known, where He reveals Himself, more clearly and more fully? There certainly are and these places and times are even more significant as occasions for worship. Let’s consider some of these.

## Responding to God's Presence in Jesus Christ

God appeared to Moses, to Abraham, to Solomon, to Isaiah, and others and each worshipped God on those occasions. Such appearances are "theophanies," literally, "God appearances." The Old Testament appearances of the "Angel of the Lord," can also be considered in this way. In the Old Testament Mt. Sinai, the tabernacle, Jerusalem, the temple and, most specifically, the Ark of the Covenant are named as specific places where God manifested His presence to Israel. Israel's priesthood, sacrificial system, calendar, diet and general pattern of life were intended to insure a proper response to God's presence in His people's midst.

The New Testament no longer designates a specific place, such as the temple, as the place where God manifests His presence. This follows Christ's teaching in John 4:21-24 that neither Samaria nor Jerusalem (*implied*, nor any other specific place) is where we ought to worship, but that we should worship, rather, "in spirit and in truth." There are, however, occasions in which God has manifested and continues to manifest His presence to us in special ways. Certainly He did so in Jesus Christ, when the Word who was God and was with God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1, 14; not merely "theophany," but "incarnation"). While it seems that generally Christ's divine nature was hidden under His human nature, there were times when those who were with Him were very much aware of God's presence – at His birth, when He performed miracles, at the transfiguration, after His resurrection. On these occasions we find people worshipping Him (Matthew 2:11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 17:6; 28:9, 19; John 20:28; Revelation 1:17; etc.). Jesus never refused to accept such worship, in spite of the first and second



commandments. He and those who worshipped Him acknowledged His presence as “God with us,” “Immanuel.” We can also worship God in Christ, in spite of His physical absence from us, in view of His promise “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

Christ’s presence, and therefore God’s presence, is specifically manifested to us in the Lord’s Supper. Christ’s promises instituting the Supper, “This is My body . . . This is My blood,” have been understood in a variety of ways by Christians of different traditions. Regardless, however, of how we understand Him to be present in the Supper, all Christians agree that our Lord is present and strengthens our faith in a special way as we observe this ordinance. This means that the Supper, whenever we observe it, is a unique opportunity to experience and respond to God’s presence in Christ. Paul’s stern warnings regarding proper reverence for the Supper (1 Corinthians 11:27-34) make sense in this light and recall the exacting nature of worship under the law of Moses. If we understand that God reveals Himself, manifests His presence, in a unique way in the Lord’s Supper, we will never take the Supper lightly or think of it as routine. We will enter into His presence with reverent expectation, thanksgiving, joy, and awe.

## **Responding to God’s Presence as His People Assemble**

Amazingly Scripture also teaches that we experience the presence of God in a unique way when we gather with other believers. Those who have trusted in Christ are indwelt by the Spirit of God (John 14:17; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 6:19, 12:13; Colossians 1:27). Christ promised, “Where two or three have gathered in My name, I am there in their midst” (Matthew 18:20).

Because of God's presence in us, we are together called Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:1-21; Ephesians 4:11-16) and "God's household . . . a holy temple . . . a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19-22). The image of a temple reminds us of the temple of the Old Testament, where God made Himself willingly present in Israel's midst. The image of a household or dwelling is startling in that it suggests that God actually "makes Himself at home" as a fellow occupant of the church with Christians. Because of God's presence in us, the communion between believers is not merely friendship, but "fellowship" (1 John 1:1-7). The Greek term *koinonea* has connotations of sharing, generosity, close relationship, family or even marital unity.

When we are with others who trust in Christ, we are, in a unique way, in God's presence. Knowing this cannot help but transform our relationships with other believers. Whether we are with one other Christian or a thousand, we have a special opportunity to respond to God's presence in worship. Whether we are praying with our believing spouse or child, raising our voices with a multitude in song or laboring together in a common task, our experience of God's presence is deepened and our expressions of worship are magnified by being with other believers.

## **Responding to God's Presence in His Word**

Another uniquely powerful manifestation of God's presence is His Word – the Bible. We must not think of this in a wooden, spatial sense. God did not become incarnate as a book and we do not worship a book. Rather, in and through His Word, God speaks to us. In and through the words of the Bible, we hear God's very words and voice. As the Holy Spirit helps us understand

the “God breathed” words of the Bible, we hear, see, understand, experience and know God ever more clearly and fully (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:13-15; 1 Corinthians 2:9-13, 2 Corinthians 3:15-18; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 John 2:27). In this way, as we read and study the Bible or hear it proclaimed, its message comes to us “not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit” and we hear the voice and Word of God (1 Thessalonians 1:5; see also 1 Corinthians 2:4). When God speaks to us in and through His Word, we cannot mistake His voice and we know that we are in His presence. Our responses may include: conviction, comfort, fear, understanding, joy, peace, or thanksgiving (Psalm 119 provides a fairly complete list) – in short, worship. “Bible study” and sermonizing can become routine and dry, especially if we think of these as ends in themselves or as merely a way to cram more Bible facts into our brains. When we understand that through God’s Word we can stand in His presence, hear His voice and worship, we will never approach the Scriptures in the same way.

## **Responding to God’s Presence in the Cross**

We have noted above several ways in which God manifests His presence to us – through creation, in the indwelling presence of His Spirit, through the Lord’s Supper, through His Word, and through other believers. We have noted that all of these ought to be occasions for responding to His presence in worship. This in turn suggests a question, “Where is God present to us in the most intimate and powerful way?” or, put another way, “Where does God come closest to us?”

The case could be made that we experience God’s presence most intimately in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer (His leading us, illumining our minds

to the truths in God's Word and "testifying with our spirit that we are children of God," Romans 8:16). We are prevented from this conclusion, however, by the fact that the Spirit's work is to bear witness to and glorify Christ (John 15:26; 16:14). It seems that even our most intimate and precious experiences of presence of God's Spirit are given to direct our attention and affection to Jesus Christ – to the "Word become flesh," in Whom we "behold God's glory" (John 1:14). Furthermore, while God was present, incarnate, in all of Christ's life and ministry, we notice that there is a special sense in which He was present in the death of Christ on the cross. Paul calls our attention to this when he notes that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

Paul's statement is especially striking in light of the fact that Jesus, as He hung on the cross, felt Himself to have been absolutely abandoned by God. "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" The mystery and irony of the cross, however, is that in this very abandonment and rejection of the Son of God by the Father, God came closest to us in our sin and alienation. The Son of God came to us, became one of us and, much more, when everything was at stake, stood with us in our sin and was condemned with us and for us. He was "on our side" of God's condemnation of sin and wrath against sin. God the Son came so close to me that He felt the distance from His Father and felt the very wrath of God that I, in my sin, deserve to feel and experience. He Himself did not sin, yet He became like me, a sinner, by taking my sin upon Himself. He stood in my place and suffered my death and experienced my separation from God. He became sin for me, a curse for me (1 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13). There is no place where God's presence with us is more radical and astonishing than this. There is no place where He came closer to me.

In the cross, God demonstrated, not just His presence with us sinners, but His love for us sinners (Romans 5:8). “Immanuel” means God with us, but in the cross we learn something even more personal and significant - God is not merely with us, but He is also “for us” (Romans 8:31). The cross is a lens through which we can look directly into the heart of God. When we look through it we see not the wrath which we expect which was poured out on Christ, but God’s unbounded love for us, which we have no right or reason to expect. We see not only God’s presence, but God’s pleasure (Isaiah 53:10-11). God is glad, He is pleased to give Himself for us in His Son, to die for us in order to be with us and for us to be with Him.

God is with us and for us in the mess of life, not just when we are bathed, dressed in our Sunday best and behaving well. He comes to us and stands with us in our fear, guilt, sorrow, alienation, cursing, humiliation, and, ultimately, our sin and our death. In the cross we are confronted not merely with God, with what God is like (He is holy, merciful, gracious, etc.), but with what God is like *toward us*. Experiencing God’s presence in this way results in the deepest and clearest note in Christian worship – It is the awe, thanksgiving, joy, humility, relief, and praise which arises from the knowledge that we are forgiven and loved by God. Contrition and sorrow for sin, fear and trembling before God’s perfect holiness, and reverence and silence before His infinite wisdom and power are completely fitting and worshipful responses to God. But none of these individually, nor all of them together, rise to the level of fully Christian worship. To be fully Christian, worship must be a response to the God Who loves, forgives and accepts us, the God Who was in Christ reconciling us to Himself.

## Responding to God's Presence in Fear and Faith

We have explored above some of the ways we experience God's presence. Let's turn our attention now to the kind of responses that are appropriate when we find ourselves in the presence of God.

Webster defines worship as reverence, honor and respect. The word "fear," as used in the King James and the New American Standard translations conveys the ideas of reverence, awe, actual fright, respect, and honor. The Old Testament especially emphasizes that we ought to respond to God's holiness, power, glory, infinity, wrath, etc., with fear and reverence, particularly in view of our position as finite and sinful creatures. Biblical examples of worshipful fear and reverence in God's presence abound: 1) Adam and Eve in the garden after eating the fruit, Genesis 3:8-10; 2) Abraham, Genesis 15:12; 3) Pharaoh and his servants lack fear of God, Exodus 9:30; 4) Israel is taught to fear God at Sinai, Exodus 20:18-21, Deuteronomy 4:10; 5) David, Israel's king, 2 Samuel 6:6-11; 7:18-29; Psalm 25:12,14 6) Isaiah in the temple, Isaiah 6:1-5; 7) Nebuchadnezzar, a Gentile ruler who learns to fear the God of heaven, Daniel 4:4-37; 8) Saul on the Damascus road, Acts 9:1-9 9) John on Patmos Island falls down as a dead man in the presence of the glorified Christ, Revelation 1: 17. The most prominent and persistent means by which Israel was taught to fear God were the tabernacle/temple, priesthood, sacrifices, dietary regulations and holy days established through Moses. These elaborate precautions for entering God's presence and the death penalty for carelessly transgressing His holiness reminded Israel continually that "Holy is the Lord." Responding in fear and reverence before God's holiness is essential to worship

not only for humans, but also for the angels, and appropriate not just in the past and present but also in eternity future (Revelation 4:8-11).

In spite of this biblical emphasis upon worship as reverent fear, however, we must also emphasize that fully Christian worship does not stop at this point. A fully Christian response to the presence of God, while acknowledging God's holiness in fear and reverence, at the same time, acknowledges and relies completely upon God's grace, mercy and forgiveness. This is what makes Christian worship unique – it is a response of triumphant, joyful faith. This response of faith will be characterized by peace (Romans 5:1), thanksgiving (Romans 6:17), joy (John 15:11), hope, love (Galatians 5:22) and many other Christian graces. It is fascinating that in many of the examples of fear and reverence cited above we also find this movement toward faith. Adam and Eve were given skins to cover their nakedness and the promise of deliverance through the "Seed of the woman." Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4). David's Psalms sound the notes of joy and faith and thanksgiving as often as those of fear and reverence. Isaiah, after crying, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips," heard God's promise, "Your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." John the Apostle, flat on his face before the holiness of God the Son, felt Christ's hand on his shoulder and heard His comforting words "Don't be afraid."

## **Responding to God in Love**

In Christian worship we must respond to God's presence in both fear and faith, both in reverence and bold, joyful thanksgiving. Without a fearful reverence for God's

holiness, faith in His grace and mercy is meaningless. Without faith in His grace and mercy, mere reverence and fear cannot please God (Hebrews 11:6). The biblical word that combines these seemingly antithetical ideas of fear and faith is “love,” and it is this term that expresses most completely the essence of Christian worship. Jesus taught us that God’s gracious forgiveness of our sins ought to lead us to love God, that the one who is forgiven much should love much in return (Luke 7:40-50). He affirmed that the first and greatest commandment is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul [and with all your strength] and with all your mind.” (Matt 22:37, Luke 10:27).

Christian worship means loving the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ with all of our faculties to the greatest extent possible. It is not merely “doing something for God” on Sunday morning, but rather giving ourselves entirely to God. Perhaps we speak too casually of “times of worship” or “worship time,” as if it was not necessary to worship God at all times. Worship certainly involves emotions - feelings of awe, love, joy, thanksgiving – that we often associate with times of worship, but it is much more than emotion. We cheapen worship and empty it of its rightful claim on us if we limit it to how we feel during a particular service or experience. Worship is a rational undertaking. We are to love God with our entire mind – “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Worship is volitional and deliberate. We are to love God with our entire will, to “present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is our spiritual service of *worship*” (Romans 12:1). This is consistent with Jesus’ insistence that genuine love for Himself and for His Father requires obedience. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments . . . He who has my commandments



and keeps them is the one who loves Me . . . If anyone loves Me, he will keep my word . . . He who does not love Me, does not keep My words” (John 14:15, 21, 23, 24). Notice, however, that Jesus does not make obedience identical with love. This wrong idea can easily degenerate into an empty plodding through rituals (Isaiah 1:11-14; Matthew 15:8).

It is important to distinguish love from emotion or passion, since these two are often confused and equated in our popular culture. It is evident that, when Paul describes love in 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7, he is not talking about those transient feelings that we call emotions. He is speaking of a settled, foundational, conscious conviction that governs all other areas of our lives. To love someone in the 1 Corinthians 13 sense means that we are deeply committed to them, that we value them whole-heartedly, above all else. I suspect that God is most interested in our growth as worshippers at this level. It also seems to me that growth at of this sort is often difficult and painful. The fact is, even as believers who have experienced God’s persistent and faithful grace for years, we may still love and cling to the wrong things. We love our comforts, our pleasures, our possessions, our sense of security and self-importance and we hold onto them until God either painfully pries our fingers loose or causes them to turn to dust in our hands. It is only by His gracious working in us that, little by little, the things of this world grow less attractive, even tiresome, and we come to know that God is more and better than we ever imagined. He faithfully works, at times even in spite of us, making us into better worshippers.

## Expressing Love for God

Our worship ought to be expressive. We are to “love God with all our strength.” This implies that we are to be active, not passive in responding to God’s presence. We are to be participants, not spectators. Worship is not watching someone else do something up on the platform. It is not entertainment. We must especially guard against this way of thinking because we are so conditioned by our culture to be passive listeners (think of TV, movies, the theatre, symphony, MP3 players, the internet, etc.). Of course, we are to be receptive as God’s Word is preached and taught, but we have not worshipped until we have actively responded to God’s Word in obedience and faith, in confession, adoration, thanksgiving, supplication or celebration.

Here are just a few of the ways to express love for God that are specifically mentioned in Scripture:

Prayer – 1 Kings 8:22-53; Psalm 141:2; Matthew 6:5-15; Acts 2:42; Revelation 8:3-4

Obedience, keeping His commandments – Exodus 16:28; 20:1-17; 1 Samuel 15:22; John 14:15; 15:10

Thanksgiving - Ephesians 5:18-20; Psalm 100:4; Romans 1:21

Singing - Psalm 27:6, 47:6, 95:1; Matthew 26:30; Acts 16:25; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16

Using musical instruments - 2 Samuel 6:5; 1 Chronicles 13:8; 2 Chronicles 5:13; Psalm 33:2-3; 43:4, 144:9, 150:4

Shouting and making a joyful noise - Psalm 32:11, 47:1, 66:1-2; 95:1

Laughing and weeping – Genesis 21:6; Job 8:21; Psalm 126:2; Luke 6:21

By standing or kneeling - Psalms 95:6; 134:1; 135:2;  
Ephesians 3:14; Philippians 2:10-11  
By clapping or lifting up our hands - Psalms 47:1, 63:4,  
134:2; 1 Timothy 2:8  
By dancing – 2 Samuel 6:12-15; Psalms 149:3; 150:4;  
Luke 6:23  
By giving and with good works - 1 Chronicles 16:29;  
Matthew 2:11; Matthew 5:16

Music is especially important in expressing worship. Some have counted over 1000 references to music in the Bible. We are invited and commanded to praise God with music. "O come let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before Him with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song" (Psalm 95:1-2; see also Ephesians 5:18-19). Our expressions of worship should be joyful, skillful (excellence of expression; Exodus 35:10, 25; 36:1, 4; Psalm 33:3; 47:7), meaningful, edifying, and without confusion (Matthew 6:7; 1 Corinthians 12:1-33).

## **Worshipping Together with the Body of Christ**

It is wrong that different expressions of worship, even the specific expressions mentioned above, should become a source of disagreement and division - wrong, but not surprising. When sinners, even forgiven sinners, attempt to join together and use a common form of expression (liturgy, Scripture reading, singing, etc.) in something so important and intimate as worship, it is not surprising that individual convictions, understandings and preferences cause friction. We seem to easily forget that our task in worship is to respond to God's presence, not to critique how others respond to His presence. We may feel that the particular expression of worship (this song, that

instrument, a particular posture or gesture) that we use together is inadequate or unfitting to express our individual love for God. In such cases, the law of love should govern us (Romans 14:1-12) and we should recognize that there is more to be gained from our worshipping together than is lost in the quality of our individual experience. God is pleased and glorified when we confess (literally “say with” or “express together”) His presence, His attributes and His works well. His pleasure, not ours, is the object in true worship.

In our corporate worship we should adopt and use those vehicles of expression that allow most of us at most times to respond wholeheartedly to God’s presence. This means that our corporate worship is bound by our shared understanding, as followers of Jesus Christ, of Who God is and of what constitutes an appropriate response to His presence. This shared understanding is created and shaped by God’s revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ and the Bible. Corporate worship, therefore, is “conservative,” in that it shares and propagates the insights of other Christians in various times and places. This is why creeds, confessions, traditional hymns and worship forms are valuable as aids in our corporate confession of Christ and worship. They are not final or authoritative in themselves, but they tell us how other worshippers have responded to God’s presence. They offer us the opportunity of joining with others in worship to the extent that they harmonize with our own experience of God’s revelation of Himself in Christ and in Scripture.

As a local congregation and as the universal body of Christ, we demonstrate that we are worshipping the same God by responding to His presence in more or less the same ways. We think and speak about Him with shared theology and confessions. We obey Him with a

shared understanding of good and evil, right and wrong, keeping His commandments, rather than each of us doing what is right in our own eyes. We pray to the same Father with words and ideas that Jesus taught us and in Jesus' name. We praise Him with words, music, symbols, gestures and postures, procedures and liturgy that we have learned from one another. We may disagree over details. We may change things a bit to suit our local and individual experience of God's self-revelation in Christ and the Scriptures. Nevertheless, to the extent that we worship in similar ways, we show that we worship the same God Who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. Our individual understandings, preferences and expressions may be quite valid and precious to us as means of intimate communion with God, but it is through shared expressions of worship that we can join with others in wholeheartedly responding to our God's presence.

## **Worship Must be Contemporary and Creative**

The previous discussion does not mean, however, that our worship, even our corporate worship, should be stagnant, unchanging, or boring. The God in whose presence we worship is eternal and immutable, but He is also infinitely and eternally active and creative. Our experience and knowledge of God cannot help but grow as we spend time in His presence. This means that we cannot help but respond to Him with new, deeper and better expressions of worship. Individually and in concert with other followers of Christ we will and must learn new ways to express our love for God. Even our Lord reflected upon this dynamic, creative aspect of His relationship with the Father, "the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, the Son also does in like

manner. For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing” (John 5:19-20). In this sense, worship ought to always be new and fresh and growing. It should be “contemporary,” a response to God as He makes Himself known to us in the present.

True worship can never be merely a matter of repeating those responses which were appropriate when we experienced God’s presence in another time and place. Those expressions may, indeed, be appropriate and helpful now, but we should also fully expect that coming into God’s presence will compel us to find new and creative ways to respond to Him – new songs, new language, new artistic expressions. Such new responses, of course, are valid only if they are true to the God Who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and the Bible, but to fail to respond to God in new ways is to deny that He is what we believe Him to be - infinite in power, knowledge, love, holiness and glory, ever creative and active. To remain static or stagnant in our worship expressions is to confess something like this, “I know everything there is to know or at least everything I need to know about God. I know how to respond to Him correctly and I see no need to respond to Him in better, deeper, more adequate and beautiful ways.” To say or think or suggest such a thing demonstrates that we have fallen into idolatry, worshipping, not the God who reveals Himself in Scripture and in Christ, but a dead, unchanging caricature. On the other hand, to grow as worshippers is really nothing less than to grow as forgiven, redeemed children of God into what He created us to be.

## **We're Here to Worship**

Knowing our God, spending time in His presence, and responding to Him with all our being, our time, energy and faculties, is the highest purpose we can pursue. There is nothing that will bring us more good, more lasting joy, more growth as human beings. There is nothing which is more profitable, more practical, more beneficial to us, as individuals or as a congregation. The God Whom we have come to know through Jesus Christ and the Scriptures is alone worthy of our worship. He made us to know Him and rejoice in His presence. This is the clear and compelling purpose that points beyond us and draws us forward into growth and service.

“We have predestined according to His purpose, Who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.” Ephesians 1:11-12

Rick Lum, June, 2008