

# Worship at FPC Houston...

What we believe about it and how we put it into practice

The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

The mission mandate we are considering is “to Craft worship services that prepare our congregants to be sent into the world.” As the session began to consider this priority and began to realize that our understandings and pragmatic questions presented a challenge, a mandate was presented to Pastor Jim Birchfield to give fresh consideration to our theology of worship.

Motion 4 states: “The session understands and declares that worship is at the center of Christian life and therefore foundational to all other priorities. So recognizing, the session directs our pastoral staff to **“Articulate a theology of worship that allows all generations of our congregation to move toward the larger goal of experiencing worship as the center of Christian life.”**

We have asked for “A Theology of Worship”. This is the right place to start. But it becomes evident that we are also asking for principles that guide our worship life, hoping that these principles will point us toward doing worship well. Perhaps we’re hoping that what we affirm will offer solutions to ongoing concerns about worship, settle our uncertainties, create unity within our preferences, and perhaps even please as many people as possible. It’s not likely that all of these desires will be entirely satisfied in this or any other specific statement, but we prayerfully desire that we will establish reliable markers that will move us toward crafting worship well; to identify the hunger for worship - in us and in others. This is what it means to enjoy God forever.

---

## Theology of Worship—Our Foundation

Developing a theology and practice of worship is an ongoing interaction with the whole counsel of God. There is no single scripture passage or complete model for HOW to do worship, but there are many passages that serve as archetypes, clues, and commands. To define our beliefs and practices around worship, we will present some thought prompts, a Biblical paradigm, a worship theology statement, and then our guiding principles.

### Thought prompts:

- “Worship is a verb” (Robert Webber, Author and Professor, Wheaton College)
- “Worship includes Affirmation, Affection and Action” (Kent Hughes, Author and Pastor, College Church, Wheaton)
- “Praise his name, we are called to doxological evangelism: Salvation is of the Lord! Let that song die and we have nothing to sing to the nations...when the people of God sing his praises, then the nations listen.” (Edmund Clowney, Westminster Theological Seminary)
- Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi. As we Worship, So we Believe, So we Live (Ancient Christian principle)

- “Worship is not an “add on” for a .... Christian. It is the foundation of our identity; expressing our highest purpose. Worship reveals what we truly believe and how we view ourselves in relationship to God, one another and the world into which we are sent to carry forward the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ. How the Church worships is a prophetic witness to the truth (we) profess. Good worship becomes a dynamic means of drawing the entire human community into the fullness of life in Jesus Christ. It attracts - through beauty to Beauty. (RC Deacon Keith Fournier)
  - “I believe that singing the Psalms would go a long way in healing the fractured Evangelical Church, because of the way they express who God is and what he does” (Charles King, Trinity Seminary, October, 2021)
  - For non-Christian witnessing Christian worship can create the possibility of (an encounter with) the transcendent and meaning. Seeing Christian worship gives them a sense that there is something more to life than what we can merely see. (Pastor Emmanuel Paulpeter)
- 

## A Biblical Paradigm: Isaiah 6

What if the Bible actually described the worship of God at this very moment? Imagine if that “worship service” had been happening throughout all time? It does and it is! We know that angels surround the Throne of God and worship continually. They minister to God in worship eternally. We even know what they say (or cry, or sing) “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” This scene ought to be riveting for us. It should fill us with joy. It regenerates the holy imagination. It corrects us when we err on the side of treating worship as a pragmatic tool that serves extrinsic goals, agendas or promotions. It reminds us of the “weight of glory” as we do our best to lead FPC toward worshipping in spirit and in truth.

In Isaiah’s profound experience with God we make our first connection between the eternal worship of God in the Heavenly realm and the human response.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6)

It’s more of an outline than a Regulative Principle, but we can see what happens in this singular biblical depiction of worship:

- Isaiah sees God in his glory. (This is more than an individual experience, he has heavenly company.) The repetition of “Holy” three times suggests the Trinity. (also in the use of the word “us” in v. 8)
- Isaiah sees that he (and all humankind) is lost.
- Upon this realization, the angel brings the message of atonement, purification by fire, and Isaiah is touched, but not consumed.
- It is God who initiates Isaiah’s call to go, and God gives him the message he is to bring

If this is a paradigm for our worship, in what ways can we magnify the vision of the God who was and is and is to come?

- Through our practice of prayers of confession and assurance of pardon, this public act forms in us the habit of ongoing confession and forgiveness.
- By our receiving of God's action of Grace that purifies without consuming us.
- Through employing the resources at our disposal to create space for an Isaiah encounter.
- By asking ourselves as leaders, "what gifts do we bring to prepare for an encounter of worship? Asking what breadth of words, actions, music, and response will reflect our commitment to worship?"
- By sending the worshiper into the world to serve. As Isaiah is sent out, God commissions him and tells him what his message will be.
- Through God's transforming power, the act of worship gives his people the message, the words, and the tasks.

---

Theology of Worship

Our life is centered around the worship of God who is revealed in creation, in Christ and through his word. In our worship we hear and respond to the Good News that by faith we are being transformed into God's Covenant Community. God's redeeming plan shapes the way we worship, renewing us so that we may live gospel-shaped lives throughout the week.

---

## Guiding Principles for Worship

**Scripture:** We preach, read, and sing a faith grounded in scripture with an intention and awareness that what it says and how we respond will change us.

- We give thanks for God's blessing through Spirit-empowered, substantial and well-prepared preaching that conscientiously seeks to unfold the riches of the Word of God. We avoid monotony in our preaching, spoken worship and song by seeking to proclaim the fulness of our faith.
- We are intentional in a robust worship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, naming God as the Trinity, and addressing the Persons of the Godhead in preaching and worship. (As Evangelicals, we believe in the orthodoxy of the Trinity but often neglect the actual worship of God as Three-in-One.)

**Comprehensive:** Worship teaches, celebrates and submits to the sweeping epic of God's nature, His story and our response.

- We consider a variety of ways to speak, pray and sing our faith. (Thoughtful creativity, not novelty)
- We affirm a tapestry of expression, genres, pacing, simplicity and complexity. The full counsel of God

implies this. Everything need not sound the same in order to fulfill its intention to be Traditional or Contemporary.

- To tell God's story, we also tell the story of transformed lives. We discern a vibrant balance of worshipping God for who he is and sharing stories of redemption, inspiration, service and gratitude.

### **God:** Worship is about God and not us

- "As believers, our calling is to respond to God's action toward us with a sense of 'duty and delight'" (Eric Routley).
- We worship God as our priority, and may do so in varied ways. Praise is not dependent on a style or narrow content but by bringing all of ourselves to worship.
- We see worship as "the work of the people."
- We do not see worship as entertainment or a "playlist", yet we revel in the joy that pervades true worship. "You will show me the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Ps. 16:11). The question is whether we are seeking our own pleasures or those found at God's right hand.
- Worship is not a summary of our individual traditions, memories and experiences, but it is embraced for its transcendent connection to God's acts and the response of his people since Creation.

### **Life:** The Worship Gathering and a Life of Worship

- We affirm that when worship is central to our church, our ministries will flourish. Our service through affinity-based and task-oriented ministries, evangelism, and discipleship do not diminish our worship priority, nor do they become less significant when we consider worship to be central.
- They do not properly function or flourish outside of a church that worships and people who worship.
- We are present together and for the world worshipping in "spirit and truth" as we are sent out to live as disciples, in personal renewal and service to others.
- We recognize that Reformation ideas helped us to see God's revelation in nature, our sacred calling even to secular vocation, and God's claim on us. But we acknowledge that worship and service are never an "either/or."
- We live our faith in community rather than in isolation, so we can celebrate and learn together. Worship is possible and important in private, but it has no roots or wings without the congregation.
- We view the sacraments of baptism and communion as indelibly etched into the worship life of the church, and evaluate ways to faithfully prepare and present the truths of our faith as they are expressed in these sacraments. Despite the passion that drove the Reformers to reject the status quo, they remained unwavering in their commitment to the Holy Spirit's presence in the sacraments of baptism and communion; we too will hold to them.
- By this measure, we consider weddings and funerals to be sacred times of worship as well.

**Mission:** Our mission mandates affirm our unique FPC opportunities, resources and location, including our interaction with the "world of the mind" and with art. This is reflected in our worship.

- We declare our intention to interact with the "world of the mind" and with art. This is reflected in our worship.
- "He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him" (Psalm 40:3). This is the "Doxological Evangelism" we mentioned earlier.
- We affirm our distinctives through the possibilities of poetic, exalted language and music of substance. We balance the gifts of the emotive, the scholarly, the poetic and the artistic ways we can praise God.

- We affirm the rich contributions – past and present - of our heritage of devout theologians, writers and poets, hymn-writers, composers and artists.
- We celebrate our gift of an enlivened and timeless faith tempered through millennia, a faith that has been passed along in part through human artistic endeavors, expressing God’s immanence and transcendence.
- We enjoy the creative expressions in our multiple service genres, inspired by the Image of God in us, celebrating the “new song” that he is always giving.

## Song: Ours is a Singing Faith

- “...speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19, Psalm 150)
- We proclaim that singing is a God-given, Spirit-evoked expression of praise.
- We are guided in song primarily by God’s word, and faithfully respond in affirmation and openness to what God is teaching us.
- We prepare to preach and lead with holy responsibility, and do not seek to entertain.
- We are dedicated to crafting services that place worthy songs on the lips of God’s people.
- We choose music with rigorous and true theology, faithful to and shaped by Scripture. As Reformed Christians, we should consider singing the Psalms in various ways.
- We choose music that is well-crafted. Good matters.
- We are discerning in the pairing of lyrics, message, and music.
- We know that our time is limited, so we make the best choices we can as God’s song is embedded into the hearts of worshipers.
- We skillfully consider ways to invite the worshiping community into the joy of corporate song.
- We balance familiar and beloved music with opportunities for teaching new and old songs and hymns that are worth knowing.
- We carefully consider music that is meaningful to the congregation. We are servant-leaders.
- We seek music that speaks a necessary or inspiring message just as we would craft a sermon. In this sense we are prophets.
- When possible, we name what music is for and what it is doing, intentionally teaching but not lecturing (e.g. labeling anthems, Psalms, sung prayers, affirmations of faith)
- We reject that music is a sacrament that conjures the presence of God, but we elevate music’s rightful place in the faithful and biblical “work of the people” (liturgy).
- We value what music says and how it serves the meaning of the worship experience. This requires flexible thinking over slot-filling.
- We value experience over explanation, but explain and teach clearly and concisely when necessary.

## Mission Through Music: We witness as a church that worships and makes music to God and for God’s glory.

- Musical expression grows out of who **we are**. Opportunities are available to us because of the gift of our history, location, presence in the community, facilities, resources, capable leaders and gifted congregation.
- We keep Godly perspective, recognizing that God does his sovereign work in countless ways. Our mandate of excellence is not attainable for every congregation, and there are things others can do that we cannot.
- God is also readily worshiped and glorified in the small and simple, and in awe and majesty. We have been given much and much is required. It is a noble goal to witness to our city through the music of worship.
- We are called, gifted and equipped for this ministry, as are others in other ministries. “Professional” and “volunteer” are irrelevant terms in worship leadership. In our circumstances we gladly support the

livelihood of musical leaders who share our vision for glorifying God. We discern and steward our investments as they contribute to crafting excellent worship.

- We are stewards of our talents. We commit to growing deeper in engaging and cultivating the music and worship gifts of our Covenant Partners who are gifted to serve. In our busy church culture, our commitments to attending faith formation classes, and our location in the heart of the city make this task challenging. We commit to an ongoing vision to evoke God's song from his people – in leadership and in the congregation.

Dan Wagner