

## **Worship at New Grace Church** *(A Biblical and Historical Perspective)*

At New Grace Church we strive to worship in a manner that is Biblically based and theologically sound, rooted in both the Jewish and early Christian traditions. We want those who worship here to encounter the real presence of the living God, the Creator of the universe, our loving Father who knows us intimately and wants to invade our lives with His love. When we meet God in this way, we will be changed by His Spirit working in us and be vessels for His Spirit to work through us to reach out to others. This kind of worship is not always goose-bumpy or warm and fuzzy; sometimes it is downright uncomfortable. But that is the sign of God working in us, making us more Christ-like and more effective for His Kingdom.

### **Worship Is a Relationship**

The fourth chapter of the Gospel of St. John reveals an encounter which took place between Jesus and a Samaritan woman who had come to draw water at Jacob's well in Samaria. The topic of the conversation initiated by Jesus was the spiritual condition of the woman's relationship with the living God. However, Jesus couched the conversation in terms of worship:

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." (Jn 4:21-24 [All Bible texts NIV])

Jesus put worship into its proper context. It is not an act we perform to appease an angry god, or a ticket we get punched weekly so we can eventually escape eternal damnation. It is not even necessarily a particular ritual performed in a particular place at a particular time by a particular people. Rather, true and spiritual worship is finite man's response to a relationship established and maintained by the ever-living God, the Alpha and the Omega, Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come, the Almighty (Rev. 1:8) and the celebration and affirmation of that relationship with all of the accompanying benefits and blessings. This theme of worship as a relationship with God, Who is the embodiment of both spirit and truth, is found in Deuteronomy 6, verses 4 and 5: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." This passage of scripture, called the Shema (the Hebrew word for "hear") has been the confessional cornerstone of Jewish worship from before the time of Jesus through the present day. In Matthew 22, verses 34 to 40, and in Mark 12, verses 28 to 31, Jesus quoted the Shema as the summation of the entire Old Testament (along with Leviticus 19:18: "... love your neighbor as yourself."). The usage of the Shema in Jewish worship (it was to be

recited twice each day) and its affirmation by Jesus as the “first and greatest commandment” (Matt. 22:38) demonstrates the idea that true, spiritual worship is tied inexorably to one’s relationship with the one true God, Yahweh. This relationship with God is engendered and nurtured through regular attendance at communal gatherings of worship, one of the activities which serve to significantly help us become disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. The consistent practice of public and private worship is crucial for our spiritual health as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **God Is the Initiator**

God Himself is the initiator of our worship. Zephaniah 3:17 says that God rejoices over His people with singing. 1 John 4:19 says, “We love because He first loved us.” In Romans 5:8 we read, “But God demonstrated His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Since God has initiated our relationship with Him, our worship is a response to His love and an acknowledgment of His lordship in our lives. Therefore, we don’t worship God to see Him work on our behalf, or move in our favor - we worship Him because He already has and continues to do so. Theologian Robert E. Webber said this about our role in worship as responders to God:

Since God is speaking and acting in worship, response to God who speaks and acts is of great importance. In my response, I am once again saying yes to God. As with the initial response when I first heard the Word of God’s love and grace, I again respond to Him in faith and love.

This kind of response makes a difference. Worship is not something rote, mechanical, or intellectual. I do not worship because I’ve always done it. I don’t worship because of peer pressure or for a better social standing in the community. I respond to God in worship because He makes a difference in my life.

Worship reminds me of my commitment to Christ. Worship calls me to love not only God with my whole heart, but my brother as myself. Therefore my response to God, Who is present in worship, is the source of power for living. It sets my world in order. It determines my priorities in life. It puts me at peace with God, my neighbor, and my own life.<sup>1</sup>

God has promised never to leave us and that He will be with us always (Deut. 31:6; Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5). However, He has promised to be particularly present when two or more are gathered together in His name (Matt. 18:19,20) and where his praises are offered (Ps. 22:3). He is particularly present when the Word is read and taught, because Jesus is the Word of God incarnate (John 1:14). He is also particularly present when bread is broken, because He is the Bread of Life (John 6:25-59; Luke 24:30-35). All of these times of particular promised presence converge in corporate Eucharistic worship. We must approach our worship experiences with the recognition and expectation that God is present and will meet us, just as the Jews did when worshiping at the temple. Hebrews 11:6 says, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that he exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.” However, we can also rest in the fact that God has promised to meet us, and indeed desires to meet us in worship.

## **Worship Defined (?)**

Scriptural worship is difficult to define, probably due to the fact that Biblical worship is best defined in the experience of worship. The words found in scripture which are used to describe and encourage worship connote an outward and visible action or expression on the part of the worshiper. For example, the most common Old Testament word translated as “worship,” shachah, or hishtah<sup>a</sup>vah, means “to bend down or prostrate oneself” in servile obeisance to God (e.g., Pss 66:4 and 99:9).<sup>2</sup> Other Biblical words involve movement and expressions which include singing, dancing, lifting the hands, standing, kneeling, assembling, drawing near, processing, clapping hands, shouting acclamations, playing instruments, giving, performing acts of mercy, studying scriptures, fasting, and even waiting on the Lord and fearing Him with trembling (a sign of deep respect). You may see some or all of these expressions in worship services at New Grace Church. You are encouraged as well to participate in these expressions, even if it feels uncomfortable at first. The actions of worship gain great symbolic meaning as they are employed by the worshiper. God is certainly most worthy of the dedication of our entire selves, including our bodies, to His worship.

## **Worship Forms Us**

The actions of worship described above lead to a deepening of faith as the worshiper encounters the presence of God manifested in the community of believers. The Church Fathers taught that “the rule of prayer is the rule of faith.” (*Lex orandi, lex credendi, est.*) (Prayer and worship are used synonymously here, as they often are in our Anglican tradition.) In other words, our communal experience of worship forms our beliefs. This principle drives home the priority of worship in the life of the Christian believer. The worship of the Church is not meant so much to be a dissemination of information on Church doctrines, dogmas, and moralities, although that may occur, but rather it is primarily the experience of God and the celebration of Christ by the gathered church community, and furthermore allowing that encounter to bring about moral and ethical change in the individual members of that community. Theologian Paul Waitman Hoon stated, “Indeed, in a sense God is glorified to the extent that man is ethicized. Nevertheless, worship is first to be conceived as encounter with God; its reference is secondarily to man.”<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, the influential eighteenth century preacher, revivalist, and founder of Methodism encouraged the use of four sources of information which have authoritative value in the spiritual life of the believer - scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. I believe that these four authorities converge uniquely in the phenomenon of Christian worship, so long as it is historically and scripturally anchored and balanced with a true sense of encountering and experiencing the living God. These authorities mold our beliefs and our behaviors in conformity to God’s standards of faith and practice. As we meet God in our worship at New Grace Church, hear Him speak through His Word and in the confessions of faith, and experience His presence anew in the praise and in the Eucharist, we must allow Him to change those beliefs and behaviors in our own lives.

In Exodus (23:14-19; 29; 34:18-26), Leviticus (1-7,16,23), Numbers (9, 28,29) and Deuteronomy (16), the nation of Israel was commanded by God to gather at specific times for worship. These times of sacrifice, repentance, prayer, rejoicing, festivity, and covenant renewal significantly served

to forge a diverse people into a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). These gatherings were a partial fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation (Genesis 12:1-3). Likewise, Christian worship forms an assembly of diverse persons into a community of faith, a local expression of the Body of Christ, the Church. The Body of Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise to make Abraham a great nation. Theologian Alexander Schmemmann expressed this concept when he wrote that worship is “the life of the Church, the public act which eternally actualizes the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ, an act, moreover, that is not partial, having reference only to one function of the Church (her “corporate prayer”) or expressing only one of her aspects, but which embraces, expresses, inspires, and defines the whole Church, her whole essential nature, her whole life.”<sup>4</sup> When we gather to worship, it is not just one of many acts we do as Christians - rather it is our primary act of love for God and His Church. We find comfort and strength as we worship in the same place as many of our friends, family, and neighbors, and grow together in His grace. As we regularly participate in the corporate worship gatherings at New Grace Church, renewing our love for God and for one another, and renewing our experience of His grace working in us, we find ourselves unified in faith and purpose with those who participate alongside us.

### **Worship Is Event-Oriented**

Biblical worship is oriented around the representation and re-presentation of an unrepeatable historical event. In the Jewish tradition, that event is the Exodus, which includes God delivering the Israelites out of Egypt, giving them the Law and forming them into a holy nation at Mt. Sinai, and leading them into the Promised Land. In Christian worship, the event we celebrate is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ through which God gives us believers victory over the forces of evil, forgiveness for our sins, and the promise of eternal life. In worship we appropriate God’s grace for the forgiveness of our sins, for the healing of our sicknesses and dislocations, for the repairing of our broken relationships, and ultimately for the overthrow of evil which seeks to destroy our lives and the world around us. In worship we are conformed to the image which was originally imprinted on us at creation, the image of God Himself. Robert E. Webber states,

The heavenly picture of worship is clear: Worship represents Jesus Christ through re-presentation. Worship tells and acts out the living, dying, and rising of Christ. Worship celebrates Christ’s victory over evil, the certain doom of Satan, and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. A brief yet comprehensive definition of worship is worship celebrates God’s saving deeds in Jesus Christ . . . A Christ-centered worship - which is event-oriented worship - can never be static and merely intellectual because what happens is an actual and real communication of the power and benefit of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ . . . The event of Christ is the only event in human history that promises relocation and centering, meaning and purpose.<sup>5</sup>

In our worship experiences at New Grace Church, we tell the story of the event of Christ chiefly in the reading and proclamation of God’s Word, and we act out that event mainly in the celebration of the Table of the Lord, the Eucharist. However, the story is woven throughout all we experience in worship - in the music, the creeds, the prayers, the choir anthems, and the testimonies.

### **Worship Looks Different - Content, Form, and Style**

The true worship of Yahweh as seen in scripture was countercultural. Jewish worship was distinctive from the worship of the surrounding pagan cultures. It was directed toward the one true God, Yahweh, instead of, in fact to the exclusion of, the prevailing local “deities.” It did not involve human sacrifice, idolatry, or appeasement. It rehearsed a real, historical event unique to the Jews, the Exodus. According to author Marva J. Dawn, (referring to theologian Walter Brueggemann’s book *Israel’s Praise*), “the worship of God’s people is praise, not only toward God, but also against the gods.”<sup>6</sup> Jewish worship was rooted in the unique covenantal relationship between Yahweh and His chosen people. Although covenants were common in the ancient world, they were always made in the secular socio-political world between a greater king and a lesser king, not in the religious arena between a god and his people. The unique aspect of God’s covenant with Israel was that Yahweh Himself was the greater King and the initiator of the covenant, and the Israelites were the “lesser kings,” of whom Yahweh only asked undivided loyalty and worshipful obedience. Although it was unique, Jewish worship was also relevant. As Donald L. Williams has stated, “Israel could and did adopt forms from her contemporary culture, introduce them into her ancient patterns of worship, and baptize them into her distinctive Yahwism.”<sup>7</sup> Christian worship, likewise, is at the same time countercultural and relevant. Marva J. Dawn wrote about this characteristic of worship: “Worship is the unique praise to God by the countercultural community that equips that community with a sufficiently deep sense of itself in relation to God that it can go from its worship into the world to effect social change.”<sup>8</sup> The gospel, which forms the content of our worship, runs contrary to the prevailing views of our surrounding “feel good” culture. Many of the activities and accoutrements surrounding worship at New Grace Church look and feel different from public gatherings in secular society. For example, the congregants sing songs unique to worship, they listen to scripture being read and taught, kneel, pray, recite historic creeds which define our faith, baptize people in water, give money, and process to the altar rail to receive communion. Participants dress in clothing which dates from another era. The church building, with its symbols, (e.g., crosses, banners), furnishings (e.g., baptismal font, altar table, hangings, candles), its cruciform (cross shaped) design, stained glass windows, pulpit and lectern, pews, steeple, organ, etc., looks different from any other kind of edifice. These activities and accoutrements lend to our worship experience the sense that something is happening here that is unique, set apart, special, timeless, important, perhaps even other-worldly. However, in our style of worship at New Grace Church, which is a blend of traditional and contemporary verbiage and arts, we attempt to build bridges to the styles of the predominating cultural milieu in which we find ourselves. The structural form of the worship at New Grace Church (i.e., the liturgy, or the liturgical form) is taken from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979. It is an ancient fourfold structure which traces its roots to the earliest description we have of Christian worship, Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” We can see in this passage an emergence of the twofold focus in worship of the Word and the Table. This is reinforced in the First Apology of Justin Martyr, a mid-second century letter which is the earliest description we have outside the witness of scripture

of the form of Christian worship,<sup>9</sup> a form which was already firmly established in the tradition and practice of the early church. This twofold focus of Word and Table tells the story of our redemption won through the dying and rising of Christ and our appropriation of the benefits of God's love as we give thanks at the communion table. At a somewhat later time, acts of entrance into worship and acts of dismissal to serve were added to the two peaks of the Service of the Word and the Service of the Table, resulting in the fourfold form we use today.

The fourfold liturgical structure we use helps us to discipline our experience of God's redemptive work in us through Jesus Christ. It clearly communicates the gospel in a way that is relevant, comprehensive, and multi-sensory. The gospel is not just heard in the sermon and scriptures but is experienced, reenacted, and remembered dramatically in the Eucharist stimulating all of our senses. The fourfold structure actually immerses the participant in a counter cultural world view - a world view dominated by the self-revelation of God in scripture and embodied in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This Christian world view is established and maintained by God Himself in a new covenant, one in which God, in Jesus Christ, is both the greater and the lesser king. We who believe in Him are beneficiaries of all the benefits and none of the curses of that new covenant because of the finished work of Jesus in His death and resurrection. Author Janice E. Leonard wrote, "In grateful recognition of God's covenant blessing in the person of Jesus Christ, the church as his royal priesthood is commanded to demonstrate loyalty to the covenant through worship that brings glory to the Lord (1 Peter 2:9-10)."<sup>10</sup> At New Grace Church, we joyfully and reverently enter God's presence with singing, spend time listening to the Word of God read and taught, respond to His Word in giving thanks at the Table of the Lord, and go from there into the world "to love and serve the Lord."<sup>11</sup>

### **Balanced Worship**

The center of Jewish worship from the Sinai encounter through the time of David was the tabernacle, which was replaced by Solomon with the temple. Both structures served the purpose of providing a dwelling place for Yahweh in the midst of His people, as stated in Exodus 25:8: "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them." At the same time, however, access to God's specifically manifested presence (the Hebrew word is "kavod," or visible glory, which dwelt in the inner sanctuary, or holy of holies of the temple or tabernacle, over the ark of the covenant) was considerably limited only to sanctified high priests and only at prescribed times. This manifestation of God's inaccessible presence in the midst of His people demonstrates two sides of the nature of God: He is both transcendent (different from and infinitely greater than us, wholly other than us) and immanent (Father God, our loving Father who cares for us individually and intimately). Christian worship should display both of these aspects of God's nature in order to achieve a balanced view of who God is, just as the tabernacle was a living reminder of that concept in the center of Jewish life and worship. Christian worship is firmly rooted in the fact of the Incarnation, when the transcendent God displayed His immanence in Jesus (Immanu-el: God is immanent, or with us). Deuteronomy 30:14, which is quoted by St. Paul in Romans 10:8, reads: "...the Word of God is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it." The objective, transcendent Word is immanent, or near to us, so that we may apply it (obey it).

This balance of displaying God's transcendence and His immanence is crucial for the proper worship of Yahweh. At New Grace Church we attempt to strike a balance in our worship between form and freedom, Word and Sacrament, learning and experiencing, *lex orandi* (the rule of prayer) and *lex credendi* (the rule of faith). Our historic liturgy, biblically-based preaching, heartfelt expressive praise, regular celebration of the Eucharist, and aesthetically beautiful and symbolically rich worship environment contribute to a worship experience which communicates the fullness of God's nature, His transcendence and His immanence.

### **Worship Is Sacrificial**

Jewish worship during the times of the tabernacle and the temple was characterized by an elaborate sacrificial system, as described in Leviticus chapters 1-7 and 22. Five different kinds of sacrifices were appointed: cereal or grain, fellowship or peace, burnt, sin, and guilt or trespass offerings. All involved animal sacrifice except the grain offering. The sacrifices fell into two basic categories: sacrifices offered voluntarily in praise and thanksgiving for God's blessings, and sacrifices demanded by God on the occasion of sin or defilement. As theologian Andrew E. Hill has written, ". . . the Hebrew sacrificial system was distinctive [from ancient Near Eastern sacrificial practices] in that it was divinely revealed and was directed toward the goal of personal and community holiness."<sup>12</sup> The sacrificial system of the Old Testament was fulfilled in the self-offering of Jesus on the cross (see Hebrews 7:27-28; 9:11-22). Jesus was both the pure, unblemished sacrifice for all time as well as the great high priest who offers the sacrifice to God. Since the sacrificial system has been fulfilled, what then are the sacrifices we offer to God? Hebrews 13:15,16 says, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." We offer our praise and good works to the Lord in gratitude for His many blessings to us. Our ultimate sacrifice is ourselves, as stated in 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." Theologian Richard C. Leonard has stated, "To worship the Lord as an act of obedience, regardless of personal 'feelings' of the moment, is a therapeutic, restorative act because it is an act of sacrifice - what Scripture calls the "sacrifice of praise."<sup>13</sup>

### **Coda**

God has promised to meet us in worship as we celebrate Christ if we approach our worship with expectant faith. He is waiting with open arms to forgive us, restore us, re-member us (as His Body), refocus us, renew us, challenge us, refresh us, and commission us for service. Richard C. Leonard wrote:

Christian worship is the celebration of Christus Victor, interpreted here as God's act of redemption liberating us from the bondage of unrelenting self-justification. Christian worship is also our response to God's act, as we bow the knee to renew our confession of covenant loyalty: "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3; cf. Phil. 2:10-11). In the setting of worship, our personal struggles are dwarfed by the victory of Christ over the forces of

sin, death, and all that would enslave us to the constant need to prove ourselves, with all its accompanying pathology. In the setting of worship, barriers to communion with our Creator are broken down as God comes to dwell among his people, to wipe away every tear, and to make all things new (Rev. 21:3-5).<sup>14</sup> (Vol 2, pg 393)

As we worship God the Father through God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit, we will discover anew the reality of His love for us and for others, and be increasingly transformed into his very image, becoming His priesthood to a world so in need of His presence.

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